

Penguin Highway

Tomihiko Morimi

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PENGUIN

Tomihiko Morimi

HIGHWAY



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PENGUIN HIGHWAY
Tomihiko Morimi

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Yen Newsletter

Seaside Café

I am extremely intelligent and never slack off on my studies.

That's why I'll be very important in the future.

I'm still only in fourth grade, but I already know all sorts of things—every bit as much as grown-ups do. You see, I always take detailed notes, and I read a lot of books. I'm interested in outer space, living things, the ocean, and robots. I like history, too; I love reading biographies of important people. I've made robots in my garage, and Yamaguchi at Seaside Café has even let me look through his telescope. I haven't actually seen the ocean yet, but I'm formulating a plan to go explore it in the near future. It is important to observe things yourself. Firsthand experience trumps any book knowledge.

Losing to others is nothing to be ashamed of, but losing to your former self definitely is. I learn more about the world each and every day. I become better than I was the day before. There's still a lot of time ahead of me before I'll be a grown-up. I did the math yesterday, and there are still 3,888 days before I turn twenty. By then, I'll be 3,888 days better than I am now. I can barely imagine how great that will make me. Possibly too great for this world to contain. I believe it will come as a shock to everyone. Perhaps lots of girls will ask me to marry them. But I already know who I'm going to marry, so I'll have to turn them all down.

I'll feel sorry for them, but on this point, I will not budge.



I live in a suburban town. There are lots of rolling hills and little houses. The farther you get from the station, the newer everything is, and you get more cute little bright-colored houses that look like they're made of LEGOs. On sunny days, the entire town sparkles like it's stuffed full of sweet treats.

Bus lines start at the station, spreading out through the town like capillary veins.

The last stop of one bus line is near my house, at the front line of the new neighborhoods growing around the station. My neighborhood is laid out in an orderly fashion, and there are still many empty lots that don't have houses built yet. When the wind blows, the grass growing on these rectangular patches sways, and whenever I see that, I feel like I'm on the savannah. But I've never seen the real version, so I can only imagine what it's like. I'd like to go explore the savannah someday. What would it be like seeing actual zebras galloping across the plains? It must be a sight to behold.

We moved here from a town on the other side of the prefecture line when I was seven years and nine months old. Four of us: my father, my mother, my little sister, and me. At the time, there weren't many houses around yet. Seaside Café wasn't there yet, and neither was the shopping mall we go to on weekends. It was like the earth before the origin of life—empty and desolate.

Back then, my father took the train from work, then a bus from the station, and as the bus drove, it would get darker and darker outside, which always made him anxious. When he got off the bus, he would see the lights of our house in the distance, like a single building in the middle of a wasteland. He would walk toward that distant glow down roads with very few streetlights, only feeling safe when he heard my sister and me laughing.

But now the town is much brighter.

Cute homes are filling in the vacant lots, Seaside Café opened (it has good pastries), there's a shopping mall with lots of parking, a cram school with a good reputation, a convenience store, and a dentist where pretty ladies work. I really like the dentist because it's like visiting a space station.

I have to walk past the dentist every day on the way to school. That walk takes me approximately twenty-two minutes.



The above was just me practicing writing.

I write a lot of notes every day. So many it surprises everyone. I think I write the most notes of all fourth graders in Japan. Maybe in the whole world. The other day, I was in the library reading a biography of an important person named Minakata Kumagusu, and it said he took a lot of notes. So maybe I don't take as many notes as he did, but I don't think there are many elementary school students like Minakata Kumagusu.

This habit of mine has made me a better person and helped me pull ahead of the crowd.

My father knows about this. After all, it was my father who

showed me how to take notes. I'm writing this in a lined notebook with a hard red cover that my father bought for me. Whenever I fill a notebook with notes, he's always really proud. He even gives me chocolate sometimes.

But writing something like this, like a diary, is fairly new to me.

Why did I suddenly decide to start writing like this? Well, yesterday, I was talking to my father in the café, and I realized I was facing a major event in my life.

"It's good to record your daily discoveries," my father said.

So that's what I'm doing.



I first saw the penguins in May.

In my notes, it says, *Woke up at 6:30. Father went to work after seeing that me and my sister were awake. Sunny. Humidity: 60%. Gentle breeze.*

I took my sister with me, and we left the house at 7:35. When it was 7:40, we met up with local children at the park in the center of the neighborhood—the whole place is laid out like graph paper. We left the park listening to the sounds of shutters opening and dogs howling. The vending machines on the side of the road sparkled in the morning light. The wind brushed past our thighs and made the power lines thrash around.

I really like this time of year. It really clears the mind.

On the way to school, my sister was super-chatty, saying anything that crossed her mind.

I left the talking to her and read my notes as I walked.

We followed the bus route toward Kamonohashi Park, then turned south at the corner with the dentist's office and walked along the line of zelkova trees. Seaside Café is across the street from the dentist. The café always opens early, so there were people sipping coffee watching us through the windows. I could imagine the warmth and scent of freshly baked baguettes.

It was too early for the dentist to be open. I remembered I had an appointment that afternoon, so I checked my notes. I made my own dentist appointments. There's a lady there who is always very nice to me, but she was probably still snoring away in the white apartment complex near the water tower. She likes to sleep in.

I looked over my list of things to talk to her about, then added a few more. I was able to write notes while I walked as well as read them.

Then, the sixth grader in front made a surprised noise, and the rest of the group stopped. I was too busy looking at my notes, so I

accidentally stepped on the heel of my sister's shoe. Normally, she would have yelled at me, but this time, she didn't say anything.

On the road just left of the dentist was a vacant lot. Surrounded by telephone poles and concrete, this one spot had somehow remained a patch of grass all this time. A large group of children were standing in a line beside it, holding their breath. Everyone was looking at something on the other side of the lot. My sister called out to me. She had her hands clasped in front of her, and her eyes were so wide, they looked ready to fall out.

A gust of wind blew past, and the grass, dampened by the morning dew, sparkled. I heard a squeaking noise, like feet sliding across the floor of our school. In the middle of the empty lot, a number of penguins were waddling around.

I had no idea why there would be penguins in our town.

Not one child moved a muscle.

I moved closer to observe them properly. It was important to investigate whether these were actually penguins or a breed of crow that had undergone some sudden mutation that made them very short and stout. The other children simply watched. The only sounds were my feet on the grass, the wind in the power lines, and the comical noises made by the penguin-like creatures.

Even as I approached, the penguins didn't run away.

I'd never seen real penguins up close, but these birds looked exactly like them. Their wings were flippers, and they moved around whimsically, always looking like they were about to trip and fall. Very odd creatures—like alien life-forms that had come to earth from some distant planet.

There was an abandoned motorcycle lying on its side, and the penguins were standing next to it. Just staring vacantly at the blue sky. Their doll-like eyes barely moved at all. Quite a bit of mud plastered their fluffy white bellies. Perhaps they'd been sliding around on their stomachs. I opened a new page in my notebook, wrote the date and time, and began to sketch them.

Eventually, local grown-ups arrived and chased the children away.

I wanted to investigate them further, but since being late to school wasn't an option, I reluctantly closed my notebook. I walked away with the others in my group. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw a group of grown-ups just standing there, staring at the penguins exactly like the kids had.

I looked it up later and found out they were Adélie penguins. Their scientific name was *Pygoscelis adeliae*. The book said they lived in Antarctica and the islands around it.

They do not live in the suburbs.

The morning classroom was filled with chatter about the penguins in town.

I was staring at the penguin notes I'd made, and kids who almost never talked to me came over, begging to let them see. Everyone who'd seen the penguins on their way to school was benefiting from their status as a witness to an astonishing phenomenon. Everybody was making such a fuss about it that Suzuki, who'd missed out on seeing them, got angry. Suzuki started talking about seeing penguins at the zoo, insisting there was nothing special about them. What we found special wasn't the penguins themselves, but their presence in a vacant lot in the middle of town, so I didn't think he had a point. But when he got mad, everyone got scared, and the class settled down.

Suzuki took a look at my notebook and snorted. "You like drawing that stuff?"

"You wanted to see them, too," I said.

"I've seen them before," he insisted. "I don't care."

Hamamoto joined us. "You don't?" she asked. Suzuki stuck to his guns but seemed less sure of himself. Hamamoto was always very confident, and even Suzuki was reluctant to mess with her. She looked at my notes and said, "Interesting. Penguins sure are cute!"

Hamamoto's skin was really fair, and since her hair was a light-chestnut color, she looked like she'd moved here from somewhere in Europe. We'd only been in the same class since April, so I'd barely spoken to her. It was extremely rare for her to come over and look at my notes. The penguin sightings were simply that astounding.

I spent the entire day thinking about penguins.

Where had they come from? That was the problem.

During classes, I considered six possible hypotheses for the penguins' manifestation. As I was scribbling with my ballpoint pen, the teacher came over, looked at my notes, and smiled. I don't think it was obvious what I was writing. I was using a shorthand I'd invented myself.

By the afternoon, Suzuki's anger had diminished the penguin fever considerably. Hamamoto was playing chess in the corner with some other kids. She spent a lot of time trying to get people interested in chess. Suzuki was making a ruckus in back with Kobayashi and Nagasaki.

While I was reading over my penguin manifestation hypotheses, Uchida came over.

Uchida was also someone I hadn't been in classes with until this spring. The two of us had formed an explorers' club. The club's charter was to explore the town and map its secrets. We'd had to do a

presentation like that for social studies and liked it so much, we'd decided it was our mission.

"Wanna check out the water tower on the hill after school?" Uchida asked.

"Not today," I said. "I've got to go to the dentist right after school. But my schedule's open in the afternoon this Sunday, so let's do things properly then."

"Mm, sounds good."

Uchida drifted back to his own desk.

I wasn't sure if Uchida was interested in the penguins or not. He could be very quiet sometimes.

Whenever I had a conversation with him, I always felt like I was talking too much. I constantly made up my mind to try to talk less but then got carried away and forgot. I just couldn't stop myself. I think important people ought to know how to hold their tongues.



On the way home from school, I stopped at the dentist.

The reason I go to the dentist a lot is because my brain is extremely powerful.

My brain consumes a lot of energy, and sugar is the main source of the brain's energy. That's why I'm always eating too many sweets. Of course, I should make a point of brushing my teeth properly before bed, but my brain is so powerful that when evening comes, I get too sleepy to hold a toothbrush and don't have time to stop and brush my teeth.

But I don't mind going to see the dentist. I really like it there.

The dentist's waiting room is always extremely quiet, and it smells of medicine. There's a silver mobile of fish shapes hanging from the ceiling. There are artificial potted plants by the window swaying in the draft coming from the air conditioner. The white couch is cold to the touch, and the white floors are sparkling clean. There's a transparent magazine rack with lots of big magazines with beautiful photographs.

I always imagine spaceship terminals will be just like this.



There was one other patient in the dentist's waiting room listening to the whirl of equipment from the examination room. It was Suzuki. He looked surprised to see me but quickly recovered.

Like I always did, I took a magazine from the rack, spread it out

on the glass table, and started reading.

Suzuki had the loudest voice in our class and was very strong. The boys under his command obeyed him without question. That structure was fascinating, and I had been studying it, recording notes I called *Observations of the Suzuki Empire*.

Suzuki was sometimes mean to Uchida or the other boys. Stuffing rags in their desks, getting in their way when they tried to go to the bathroom, ordering his minions to give them the silent treatment, or scribbling all over their notebooks. It seemed like that was Suzuki's idea of fun, but I thought he was wrong about that. In my opinion, inconveniencing others for your benefit requires a good reason and appropriate countermeasures. Suzuki had no justification, though, and never bothered taking any countermeasures.

I shut the magazine with a snap, and Suzuki jumped.

"Suzuki," I said. This seemed to surprise him even more.

He frowned. "What?"

"You've got it, too? I can tell by looking at you."

"Got what?"

"Stanislaw Syndrome. Your teeth get full of germs, and the only cure is to have them all pulled."

"What? Never heard of it."

"Oh? You didn't know? I already had all mine pulled. If they pull them all at once, you won't be able to eat, and you'll die. So they pull a few each week. Then, they replace the ones they pull with artificial teeth. I'm pretty sure you've got the same thing."

"I don't have that," he fumed, getting mad. "I only had a filling fall out! My mom said so."

"That's just what mothers tell you to make you relax. I mean, if they said you were going to have all your teeth pulled, most kids would be too scared to go to the dentist. But I think you have the right to know what they're about to do to you."

"Seriously...?"

"The only way to stop the disease from progressing is to pull every last tooth. If the germs get past your gums and into your body, your face will puff up like a *manju*. You'll get a high fever, and bitter-tasting things like enoki mushrooms will sprout from the gaps between your teeth. Nobody will be able to recognize you. You'll suffer and then die. It's a rare disease from Europe, and the government's in a panic about it spreading. You must have seen it in the papers."

"I don't read any newspapers..."

"I definitely recommend asking the dentist to pull all your teeth fast. It's better than having mushrooms growing out of your mouth, right? If you can put up with the pain for a month or so, it's easy."

By the time the receptionist called Suzuki's name, Emperor Suzuki I's face was frozen stiff. He went off to the examination room, and a little while after that, the lady came out. Before the door closed, I could hear Suzuki crying softly. I kept reading my magazine, and the lady sat down next to me. She smelled good.

"Hey now, kiddo," she said, taking the magazine from me. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Something like what?"

"You little liar. You fed Suzuki quite a story. Poor thing."

"Poor thing? You should be feeling sorry for Uchida."

"Who in the world is Uchida?"

"I'm not telling. This is between me and him."

"Oh, you're evil! You've even learned to deflect!"

Shaking her head, she flopped down on the couch, muttering "Such a snot," and began flipping through the magazine on her lap.

"Hey," the receptionist prompted.

"Hold on," she said, not looking up from the page. "I'm busy teaching this one a lesson."

But she just kept reading the magazine.

I put my hands on my knees, sitting upright. I glanced sideways at her. She was nodding to herself, making noises of agreement, just like she always did when I found her reading at Seaside Café. Like she'd completely forgotten I was there. The clock's ticking was very loud. The receptionist looked worried. I started to wonder if the dentist was going to come out and yell at her for slacking off at work.

"Maybe it wasn't very grown-up of me," I admitted.

"Well, you aren't a grown-up," the lady said, not looking up. "So do what you want."

"Suzuki does mean things to him, but Uchida didn't ask me to get revenge for him. So I don't think I have a right to pay Suzuki back in Uchida's place. I should've at least discussed it with Uchida before doing anything."

"You always make everything so complicated! Oh, there it is. See? Look—right here."

The page she was staring at was a photo of a rock completely covered in penguins. She snorted. "Penguins are a total mystery. I don't get it," she said. It occurred to me to talk to her about the penguin incident that morning. After all, it had happened in the empty lot right next to the dentist. But she said, "I like penguins. I like blue whales and platypuses, too."

So without thinking, I said, "*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, right?"

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Platypuses."

"What about them?"

“The scientific name is *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*. I saw it in a book.”

“Huh. Who knew? But that fact is completely meaningless before their bizarre cuteness.”

“True enough.”

“I’d better take this with me,” she announced, and she tore the page right out of the magazine. She looked down at what was now her photo. “They’re kinda like you,” she observed. “Tiny, but with attitude.”



By the time they were done with my teeth, the sun was starting to set, and the town had turned gold.

I left the dentist and went into the vacant lot next door. I wanted to investigate the penguin-emergence grounds once more. The savannah-like grass was still swaying in the wind, but there wasn’t a single penguin left. The grown-ups must have put them on a truck and taken them away somewhere. The vacant lot felt even emptier than before.

I went to the middle of the lot and looked up at the sky, feeling like a pebble rolling around a vast, open plain. But that was only a metaphor. Even I can’t imagine a pebble’s emotional state.

The blue of the sky looked as if someone was mixing cream into it. I’d seen similar skies in the planetarium at the Space and Science Museum. There was a vapor trail slicing across the dome-like expanse and a small passenger plane at the fore of it. As I watched, the plane traced a smooth arc across the sky, slowly expanding its trail.

Watching the little silver fleck slowly drawing a line across the sky was fascinating, so I stood there gazing up for quite a long time. Until my neck started hurting. Every time I see a vapor trail, I can’t help but stare. Uchida and I had agreed we’d go see a space shuttle launch someday, but I felt that if I saw something that amazing, my neck might never go back to its original position.

I wondered what the penguins were doing now. Why had they suddenly come here? I definitely had to investigate this matter further.

I locked my hands together behind me like Sherlock Holmes and began pacing the ground. I could see the windows of the dentist office across the lot. The lady’s face appeared in one, grinning at me.

She mouthed “Snot” at me. She was definitely underestimating me on account of my age. She didn’t know how much the work I put in every day was improving my mind.

“She’ll soon see!” I muttered.

The cool breeze brushing across the grass carried the scent of

curry from some nearby kitchen. Maybe it was even coming from my own family's kitchen. I felt like I could see my mother standing at the back door waving.

I suddenly felt very hungry. And even a bit sleepy.



I asked my mother over dinner, and she confirmed that a truck had come and taken the penguins away. I imagined them all lining up and filing onto the truck.

"Mommy, where'd the penguins come from?" my sister asked.

"I really don't know," my mother said unhurriedly. She was never one to rush anything. "Maybe someone abandoned them there. You know how people abandon pets sometimes."

"Poor abandoned penguins!"

My sister could be nice sometimes.

And with that, the day ended. But the penguin incident was far from over.

The next day, we learned that the penguins had vanished from the truck that had been transporting them. When it arrived at its destination, the staff opened the back and found not a single penguin inside. This was an extremely curious turn of events—curious enough that it made the papers. I cut out the article and pasted it in my notebook.

And astonishingly, the penguins reappeared in town. According to my records, penguins were spotted on both Wednesday and Friday of that week alone.

The Wednesday incident occurred at noon. A line of penguins had come walking out of Kamonohashi Park and were struck by a car while crossing the highway. The penguins were flung away, rolling across the asphalt, but then stood up and ran off as if nothing had happened. It was clear these penguins were incredibly tough.

The Friday incident occurred in the morning. A bunch of penguins entered Yoshida's yard on the same block as the dentist's office. Their dog started barking, though, and the penguins ran away. Yoshida's dog had bitten one of them but then started whining. It was its first time biting a penguin, so it must have been surprised.

On my way home from school, I checked the locations of the penguin sightings several times and looked up information about penguins at the library, but I didn't find any useful clues. The mystery only deepened.



Saturday started out busy.

Preoccupied with a loose tooth, I sat at my desk trying to collate my research. This involved lining up the notes I'd taken so far on my desk, indexing the entries, and rereading them. Anything that struck me as important I cleaned up and wrote down in a new section of notes. This was my research process. This approach allowed me to make all sorts of discoveries. I had lots of similar indexes—The Suzuki Empire, Project Amazon, The Lady, Selfish Sister Summaries, etc.

That day, I went through my notes, making a new index. I called it Penguin Highway. This was a collection of my notes related to the penguins. I had read in a book that penguins always follow a specific route from the water to the land, and these routes are called penguin highways. I liked that turn of phrase, so I decided to call my research into the appearances “Penguin Highway research.”

In the afternoon, I worked on a space station I was making out of LEGOs, then I studied chess for a while. I'd promised to play chess with the lady from the dentist's office at Seaside Café that evening.

She liked to joke around a lot, but deep down, she was a hard worker with a lot of potential. After she finished work on Saturday, she always spent the rest of the day studying. I wasn't sure what she was studying, but she would sit in the café window all night, taking notes and reading books. While she did this, she would narrow her eyes as if the light was too bright, furrow her brow, and often nod to herself.

When I left for Seaside Café, the lady was almost done with her studying. I walked through the neighborhood to the main road, and as I got closer to the brightly lit Seaside Café, I saw her sitting in her usual seat. For some reason, this made me extremely happy.

I spent exactly one hour learning chess from her.

A girl in my class, Hamamoto, was working hard to make chess popular. I'd never played chess with Hamamoto but had been fond of it for some time. I liked the way the pieces lined up perfectly in their squares. I liked picking up the castles and horses and moving them around, and I liked talking to the lady as we played. I told her all about the things I'd written in my notes. She was impressed sometimes, but odds were much higher she'd just say “Hmm” and keep glaring at the board. Sometimes that elevated to a “Huh.” It was extremely rare to elicit a “Wow.”

That day, she was wearing a thin sweater the color of fava beans. I took my eyes off the board and looked at her breasts, admiring the way they rose from her chest like two hills.

“C'mon, kiddo. Eyes on the chessboard.”

“They are.”

“They aren't.”

"They are."

"You're just looking at my boobs."

"Am not."

"Are you looking, or aren't you?"

"I am, and I'm not."

"I'm seriously worried about your future."

She won the first chess game, and I won the second. "We're evenly matched," she said.

I lectured her on penguins. There were lots of types of penguins. Emperor penguins, gentoo penguins, etc. I told her about the rookeries they formed to warm their eggs. About the penguin highways. The lady said, "Huh." She knew about the penguin incidents. "Truth is stranger than fiction," she said, laughing. "What's your theory? Where do you think they come from?"

"I need more information."

"I think aliens brought them."

"I can't deny the possibility, but I see no reason for them to bother doing that."

"Invasion, what else. Penguins are adorable, right? They can lure earthlings in, make us let our guard down, and then—poof! They've toppled governments."

"I see. A viable hypothesis."

She shot me a frightening look. "Don't mock me. I'll pull your teeth out."

If only I could slow down the workings of my brain so I could stay up later. Unfortunately, by eight, I was always really sleepy. The chess pieces were getting blurry. I started nodding off, and the lady said, "Yo! You getting sleepy?"

"Am not."

"Again with the lies!"

"I use my brain a lot, so I get sleepy easily."

"I'm jealous. I often can't fall asleep."

"What's it like being up in the middle of the night?"

"Everything gets this really mystical vibe. Well, it's nothing kids need to know about."

The lady started putting the chess pieces away, which made me very sad. I wasn't sure why, but I often got very sad when I got sleepy.

"You'd better get home. They're late coming to fetch you, huh?"

"I'm still fine. I'm awake."

"Sleep does the body good. Go to bed, kiddo." She nodded to herself. "Sleep well and grow up fast."

Soon, the door rattled open, and my father came to get me. It was dangerous to walk home alone in the dark, so I'd promised to always wait until he came to pick me up. The sound of the door sliding open

made me hit peak sadness and peak sleepiness. There was no getting around it, either.

My father bowed his head to my chess mate, and she smiled back. She always acted much more grown-up when interacting with him.

“Hope he wasn’t too much trouble,” my father said.

“Not at all. It was my pleasure. Aoyama’s a bright boy.”

“See?” I said.

The lady said good night, and my father and I walked home through the darkness.

I was so sleepy, I forgot to brush my teeth that evening. How wretched. I really needed to be able to manage myself better. When would I be grown-up enough to handle this sleepiness? Would I ever learn to brush my teeth diligently so I could become a proper adult with shiny-white permanent teeth?



On Sunday, I woke at eight and went to buy breakfast from the bakery at Seaside Café.

It was a very beautiful day, and the bright morning sun shone through the zelkovas. My father bought four pastries and a large baguette. It was my job to carry the loaf of French bread, feeling the warmth of it through the paper bag. We left the top of the bag open so the baguette wouldn’t get soggy. It smelled amazing.

We walked back past the row of trees, and I thought about how the lady was probably at church now. The lady went to the small church next to Kamonohashi Park. I’d been inside it once myself.

Back at the house, my parents got breakfast ready while I went to wake up my sister. If we left her to her own devices, she would never wake up, no matter what. Like she was still a baby. But whenever I tried to make her get up, she was always really selfish and wouldn’t get out of bed. She really baffles me sometimes. But I know she doesn’t mean to.

After breakfast, my father said he had work to do, so he went off to Seaside Café. When he did this, he always took his grid-lined notebook and fountain pen and lots of documents all stuffed into a transparent briefcase. Someday, I want to own a transparent briefcase filled with my own research and go to all kinds of places to study it.

I holed up in the second-story laboratory (my room) and continued work on my space station. I had studied photographs of the real space station and was building one that looked just like it. I had only a finite number of bricks, though, which caused me no end of grief. I needed a lot more white ones. While I was desperately searching through the bricks, a warm breeze came through the

window, and I heard my sister's and mother's voices as they worked in the garden.

After the three of us ate lunch, Uchida came over. We'd agreed to go exploring that day.

Like I always did when I went exploring, I had my rucksack with me. It had lined notebooks, a compass, a small blanket, a folding umbrella, a thermos my mother filled with tea (and sugar), and emergency provisions. The emergency provisions had been brought back from America by my father on one of his trips. A small amount of beef jerky—very tasty and extremely nutritious. But no matter how tasty it was, you could only eat the emergency provisions in real emergencies. This was the tragic nature of emergency provisions.

"Be careful," my mother and sister said as we left.

Our expedition team set off through the neighborhood. The Sunday afternoon streets were very quiet, and the sunlight was warm. A cat stepped out from a hedge and stopped to watch us.

As we walked, we talked about outer space.

Uchida told me about the birth of the universe, cosmic inflation, black holes, and things like that. I talked about the space shuttle and the space station and the space elevator. I liked the water tower on the hill because it looked like an escape pod for leaving the planet. When I started talking about exploring distant stars in a spaceship, Uchida expressed concern that our spaceship would fall into a black hole. He thought about black holes a lot. "When the water runs out of the bath, it's like a black hole. Scary, huh?" he said. Uchida was very interesting.

The hill with the large water tower on top of it was to the east of the neighborhood.

The area around the hill was all forest not yet marked for development. The forest was filled with little paths, and there was no telling where they would take you. One of our key missions was to make a map of these trails.

We went up the concrete stairs to the water tower. It was a giant round tank surrounded by a tall fence. There were NO TRESPASSING signs plastered everywhere with pictures of drowning children on them. These were always a little alarming.

The deep forest spread out beyond the water tower.



Each time the warm breeze swept over the hill, the forest moved. If a really strong gust hit it, the whole forest would rustle.

Uchida said he wanted to take a photo of the water tower, so we elected to pursue individual investigations. Uchida moved around,

looking for a good angle. I began taking notes on the view of town from the hill.

In the distance were the mountains that marked the edge of the prefecture. There were green hills all over the place. The roofs on the tight rows of houses sparkled in the sunlight. Against the side of the hill was an apartment building that looked like shortcake. I could see the pointy steeple of the church where the lady prayed. The eye was naturally drawn to the giant shopping mall. The highway ran through all of this like it was stitched across the neighborhood, and the lights moving along it were cars. From on top of this hill, I could see trees in town and on far-off hills, all swaying in the breeze. The sound of it didn't travel this far, but I could clearly see the wind's progress through the entire town.

I wrote all this down in my notes.

At last, Uchida came and sat next to me. We drank some tea.

There were lots of hills in this area. Like a lot of green breasts rising up under the blue sky. I wiggled my loose tooth, thinking about breasts.

Lately, I'd developed the opinion that breasts were one of life's great mysteries. I often found myself thinking about the lady's breasts, but why were hers different from my mother's? They were the same physical object, so why was the effect they had on me so dramatically different? I never accidentally found myself staring at my mother's breasts, but I often caught myself doing just that with the lady's. I felt like I could never get tired of looking at them. I wondered what it would be like to touch them. The more I thought about it, the more baffling these feelings were. Was this what it meant to observe yourself?

I talked about all this with Uchida. "What do you think, Uchida?"

"I don't know anything," he said, staring up at the water tower. His ears had turned red.

Our rest ended there, and we stood up to go explore. But then we heard a *sguishguishguish* from somewhere. Different from the sound of the wind in the forest. We looked around, wondering what it was, and saw a bunch of penguins walking along one of the paths out of the woods.

"Hnya!" Uchida choked. A very strange noise.



The trails in the forest behind the water tower were covered in penguins.

Some were running about, wings flapping behind them. Others were sunning themselves in the light drifting through the trees.

Uchida and I traced the Penguin Highway backward. I was getting quite excited. I thought we had a chance of solving the mystery of where all these penguins came from. Our exploration's goal had suddenly become investigating the Penguin Highway. We walked on, forgetting all about the wind whipping through the trees, about our map, about the water tower, and about breasts.

"Seven! Eight!" Uchida yelled.

"Nine! Ten! Ah, eleven, twelve, thirteen!" I yelled back.

The number of penguins soon passed twenty.

We moved faster and faster until we were almost running. We found a place where the path narrowed, and here there were a bunch of penguins, all stuffed together like they were playing *oshikura manju*, that game where everybody stands back-to-back in a circle trying to squish together. At this point, we gave up counting them. When Uchida and I came running, the penguins scattered, opening a path for us.

From then on, there were far fewer penguins.

We'd been assuming the penguin rookery was deep in the forest, and they were entering town from there, but there was no sign of it. The path we were following suddenly turned and passed behind the nets of the athletic field. The field on the other side of the green nets was deserted. There was a single penguin leaning against a tree, taking a nap, but it was all alone.

"Maybe this is the wrong way?" Uchida suggested.

We persevered, passing along the back of the field. It was very quiet here. Inside the grove, we found the remains of a small truck. How it got there, I have no idea.

At last, we came out in a flat clearing covered in thick grass.

High-tension towers loomed over us, reaching for the sky. The forest deposited us on the east side of the field. We pushed through the grass, headed north, and found a diagonal slope made of concrete. There was a long staircase leading down. At the bottom was a two-lane road, and beyond that was a lot for buses to turn around. This was the last stop on the bus line, the edge of our neighborhood. There were no penguins around.

We gaped across the field, stunned. We felt faintly silly for having chased the penguins like this. A cluster of clouds drifted across the sun, and it suddenly grew much darker. Uchida and I stood next to one of the towers, discussing our next move.

"Where'd the penguins come from?" Uchida asked, staring up at the tower.

I looked back at the forest. "Maybe we stepped off the Penguin Highway somewhere. They might have come from somewhere deeper in the forest."

We laid our half-drawn map down on the grass and discussed possible penguin origins.

We were so focused on this that we didn't notice Suzuki and his two minions until they had us surrounded. Uchida heard footsteps, glanced up, and immediately looked ready to cry.

Suzuki came toward us grinning. "Ugh, Uchida's here," he said, disgusted. Saying nothing, Uchida just started backing away.

Suzuki glared at me. "As for you," he said, grabbing my shoulder. He was roughly the same height as me but a little fatter. "You're a liar. I oughta kill you."

"A liar? When did I lie?"

"That crap at the dentist."

"You mean when you started crying at the dentist's office?"

"Shut up!" Suzuki turned beet red and punched me in the shoulder. "You're a liar! Drop dead! I'm gonna kill you!"

I staggered a little but managed to hold my ground.

"Do you really hate me enough to kill me? I really don't think killing me will do you any good. I won't be easy to kill. Before you manage it, I'll definitely be able to gouge your eyes out or bite your ears off. I bet that would really hurt. And then you'd be arrested. Your parents would cry a lot. If you hate me so much that you're willing to lose your eyes and ears and go to prison, then I guess you leave me with no choice. It's a shame, but I'll just have to fight back."

This seemed to stun Suzuki a little.

"Shut up," he spat after a pause. "You sure talk a lot of crap."

"I'm just trying to help you understand."

"Shut up."

"But I definitely did wrong you the other day. So I apologize. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that, and I shouldn't have done that to Uchida, either."

I bowed my head. Uchida looked startled. "What?" he asked.

"At the dentist, I tried to pay Suzuki back for a few things. You didn't ask me to, but I tried to get him back for you anyway. Without getting permission from you to act on your behalf, though, it was inappropriate for me to do anything to Suzuki. It wasn't fair. I should have asked you first, informed Suzuki of that fact, and then gone for payback."

"You've lost me," Uchida said.

Suzuki growled "Shut up!" one more time, but then he started grinning. He had one of his minions hand him a long piece of rope. "I've got just the punishment in mind for you two," he announced.

Uchida grabbed my arm.

"No," I said. "We're busy."

Suzuki's grin suddenly gave way to a much scarier expression. He

jumped toward me. Uchida shrieked and ran away. I tried to run, but Suzuki grabbed my hair.

“Hey, Suzuki! That hurts!” I shouted. Suzuki was yelling, “You! Little!” If my follicles were ruined and my hair didn’t grow back, it would be Suzuki’s fault. I grabbed Suzuki’s crotch and squeezed, urging him to let go of my hair, and he squealed. I let go and shoved him back. He rolled across the grass yelling, “Dammit! Kill him! Kill him!”

“Uchida!” I yelled. I shouldered my rucksack, grabbed the map, and ran north across the plain. “Let’s run for it! Retreat!”

We ran down the long, exposed concrete stairs.

Normally, we’d have gotten away clean, but I stepped on an empty Coke can at the bottom of the stairs and tripped. Suzuki and his cronies piled on top of me. “You’re heavy!” I complained. Uchida ran off down the deserted road really fast. At least he got away. The one bright side to this.

They hauled me across the road to the bus terminal. It wasn’t much of a terminal. It was about as big as the park where we congregated on the way to school. There was a single, flimsy covered waiting area in the front and a vending machine selling soft drinks.

Suzuki brought the rope and tied me to the vending machine, arms at my sides. This was one of the Suzuki Empire’s famous punishments, and boys were often found tied to one thing or another. Suzuki also squeezed my crotch once as payback for earlier, so I grunted.

Then, he ordered his minions to dump my rucksack out on the road.

The thermos full of sweet tea was thrown into the forest behind the bus terminal. Suzuki shoved the map Uchida and I had made into his pocket. Then, he put my notebook on the ground, and each of them pissed on it in turn. The notebook was ruined.

“Serves you right.” Suzuki gloated, and the emperor of the Suzuki Empire went away.



I waited patiently, trussed to the vending machine. Suzuki’s lackey Kobayashi had done a very good job tying me up, and I was stuck standing at attention. His skills were impressive.

The sunlight streaming down on the bus terminal was beautiful, but there was nobody there. On a Sunday afternoon, it could be a while before a bus came through. I listened to the sound of the wind and resolved to do what I could while I waited for someone to come and rescue me.

I managed to move enough to get a hand in my pocket. I had a special tiny notebook there and a tiny ballpoint pen my father had bought for me. I'd practiced for this eventuality, and I could now take notes with the notebook still in my pocket.

I glanced over at the notebook on the asphalt. Drenched in the empire's piss, it gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Relying on my memory, I began transcribing the contents of that notebook. Copying it.

I looked up at the sky, listening to the soft song of a lark. A warm, gentle breeze ruffled my hair. It was a really beautiful afternoon. With nothing else to do, I became preoccupied with wiggling my loose tooth. It was slightly out of place to begin with, so I started pushing it around with my tongue. The sky was so blue, and here I was all alone, wiggling a loose tooth, climbing the stairs to adulthood. That notion struck me as poetic, so I wrote it down. I'd like to write poetry someday. Maybe I had a hidden talent for it.

I tried singing for a while, hoping this would help me forget the loose tooth. I couldn't think of any other songs offhand, so I was singing "Jingle Bells," totally out of season. "La-la-la," I sang. "La-la-la."

I heard someone laughing. I hadn't noticed at all, but somebody was sitting in the waiting vestibule next to the vending machine. I recognized her by her laugh alone.

A minute later, the lady stepped out. She was wearing blue clothes that looked like they'd been cut out of the heavens. She had a purse with her. She seemed sleepy but was smiling. Her hair was a little mussed.

She came out into the sunlight, almost stepped on my notebook, yelped, and jumped sideways. Then, she pretended she'd only just seen me there.

"What are you doing, kiddo?"

"Pretending to be a vending machine."

"Is that fun?"

"It hasn't been very fun, no."

"You are an enigma," she laughed. "This was Suzuki's idea of payback? After that lie, you only have yourself to blame."

"If you were there the whole time, you could've rescued me."

"But you didn't ask me to, right?"

"I admit you have a point there," I conceded. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to take a bus to the station, but in the end, it was too much of a pain. I took a rest in the vestibule here and nodded off. It happens."

The lady untied the rope. Free again, I inspected the damage. My

rucksack had been stomped on and was crumpled but intact. I managed to find the thermos they'd thrown in the woods, but the notebook was soaked and beyond salvation.

"Don't know how they think up such nasty stuff," the lady mused, sounding impressed. "Suzuki's kinda cute, but he can be pretty nasty."

"It's because he's an emperor."

"A what?"

My tooth was waggling, so I stuck my fingers in my mouth.

"Want me to yank that for you?" she asked.

"No, thanks. I've decided to get it out myself."

"I won't steer you wrong, I swear. Think of it as an experiment."

"Oh? I do like experiments."

The lady took a sewing kit out of her purse, snipped off a piece of thread, and looped it around my loose tooth. The wind caught her hair, and it smelled really good. "Now then, kiddo, I'm going to pull on this thread. Marvel as the tooth shoots right out."

But when she tried to tug the thread, I moved with her, so the tooth didn't pop out. She wound up wandering around the bus terminal, and I followed, circling her like a satellite.

"Come on," she snapped. "It obviously won't work if you follow me around like that. Stand still."

I wasn't scared of having my tooth pulled. My body just moved on its own.

The lady stopped in front of the red vending machine and said, "I've got an idea." She put some change in and bought a can of Coke. "Take a look at this," she suggested, tipping the can in my direction. Holding the string taut, she tossed the can in the air above my head. My eyes followed the red speck across the bright-blue sky, but I didn't move my head at all. *This trick would hardly be enough to get my tooth out*, I thought.

The cylinder spun as it arced across the horizon, like a spaceship using centrifugal force to create internal gravity. But just as the red can was about to vanish from view, something white covered it, like it had suddenly frozen. *Huh*, I thought.

This phenomenon started from the *la* in *Coca-Cola* and spread up the side of the can like a tsunami crossing the ocean. The white parts seemed to foam and then turn black. The whole thing swelled, as if it had taken a deep breath. Two black wings seemed to erupt off the sides. At this stage, the Coke had turned into a black-and-white unidentified flying can (large). It continued to expand, still spinning as it began losing altitude. Its tip stretched out, transforming into a beak, and flapping its wings, it landed in the middle of the bus terminal, rolling across the ground. When the Coke can righted itself, it was no longer a Coke can.

Awkwardly flailing two black wings, the former Coke can waddled a few steps before stopping and staring up at the sky as if asking “Where am I?”

I had witnessed the birth of a penguin.

I stared at the penguin a while longer until I tasted blood in my mouth. I turned back to the lady. She was standing in front of the vending machine, drinking from another can of Coke, and holding my tooth between her fingers. “See? It popped right out,” she said. I spat some bloody saliva onto the asphalt. She bought me some mineral water, so I swigged at that a little at a time, washing the blood out of my mouth.

“What was that?” I asked.

“A penguin, obviously,” the lady declared. She plopped the freed tooth in my palm and walked over to the penguin while sipping her Coke. The penguin waddled toward her, almost tackling her legs, then wandering around them.

There was a gust of wind, and the lady put her hand on her forehead, as if warding off the sunlight.

“I’m an enigma, too,” she said. “See if you can figure this mystery out. Think you can do it?”



That evening, I went to Seaside Café.

Sunlight streaming from the mountain on the prefecture border turned the clouds in the dome-like sky above pink. It was like the whole town was inside a giant planetarium. Seaside Café sat on the side of the road like a mysterious laboratory sparkling near the shore.

My father was working at a table by the windows, documents laid out in front of him.

I felt bad for interrupting, but eager to talk to him, I sat down in the seat opposite. I really wasn’t confident in my ability to explain the phenomenon I’d witnessed. The moment I sat down, I felt like maybe it should stay a secret between the lady and me—and that I shouldn’t talk about it with anyone else, even my father.

It was rare for me to sit in silence, so this may have surprised my father. He was busy drawing a diagram with a fountain pen in his grid-lined notebook, but after a while, he looked up, his eyes staring at me through his glasses.

“What? Something happen?” he asked.

“Dad. I’ve witnessed an astounding phenomenon,” I confided. “But I have no objective evidence to prove it was real, so I can’t say anything more. I believe I need to investigate this further before I do.”

“Can you give me a hint?”

“It involves the lady from the dentist’s office.”

“A little more.”

“I don’t know how to put this, but she’s very strange. Fascinating. I am curious to know more.”

“I see,” my father said, nodding. “It seems you’ve found a worthy subject.”

He gave me some chocolate. It was on the bitter side.



I use my brain so much at night that I end up getting sleepy before my little sister. I make up for that by waking up earlier. Sometimes even before the sun starts rising. I’m sure I get up earlier than any kids in my neighborhood.

There’s a large window on the right side of my bed, with an azure blind. In the morning, the sunlight filters through it, creating soft beams of light.

When I woke up that morning, the light in the room was a chilly blue, like I was underwater.

I was lying in bed thinking about what it would be like to be a newly born life-form in the surf.

The first life-form had come into existence four billion years ago in a puddle on the rocks. It had floated there, in that water. The new being was really tiny, but life gradually grew bigger, more complex, and while some creatures went extinct, others flourished, until we got the world we have today.

I was born to my father and mother. My father and mother were born from their fathers and mothers. Blue whales, zebras, and penguins were, too. All living things were born from other living things. But a dizzyingly long time ago, somewhere, a child was born of no father or mother.

I’d talked with Uchida about the origins of life before. Uchida had said, “Just thinking about it makes my head spin.”

How had the Earth’s first, strange child crossed that primordial barrier?

This was an extremely critical problem, I thought. Perhaps in the future, my research would make it all clear, and I’d win the Nobel Prize.

I liked looking around my room, thinking about things on a worldwide scale. I could see the half-built space station. I could see all the books my father had given me and a row of notebooks with all my research in them. On top of the bookshelf was a triceratops skeleton made of paper, a Christmas present. On my desk was a globe my father bought me when I started school. The rucksack for exploring

and the backpack for school were both next to the desk. I'd put a new notebook on the desk yesterday so I wouldn't forget about it.

Downstairs in the living room, I could hear my parents talking. And plates clacking. My father was eating breakfast. I really enjoyed listening to these sounds while forming a plan for the day. This morning, it felt even more fun than usual.

I wonder why? I thought, and then I remembered the penguins and the lady.

I had embarked on a research project of great significance.

That alone made me so happy, I wanted to jump right out of bed. Just then, my sister came running in—rare for her to get up this early—and yelled, “Wake up!” She didn't know I'd been up for a while now and was all proud of beating me. Even though I'd been here thinking about things of world-scale importance.

My sister jumped on top of me and bounded around like a baby kangaroo. I fought back, and she got all tangled up in the blanket. When she realized she was stuck, she started crying and yelling, “Let me out!” Feeling sorry for her, I undid the blanket, and she started laughing. “You've got missing teeth like an old man!”

It is very hard to maintain the dignity befitting an older brother.



Even at school, I continued my research on the penguins and the lady.

I drew a picture of a penguin in my new notebook and wrote as detailed an analysis as I could of the circumstances under which the lady turned the Coke into a penguin. I thought a lot about what her secret might be, but I had only witnessed the birth of a penguin once. I needed a lot more data. I would need the conjurer's cooperation for that. *I should swing by the dentist on the way home and ask her*, I thought.

During break, Uchida came over and stood silently by my desk. Uchida was the silent type, but this was a much more significant silence than usual. I wondered why, and he asked, “Aoyama, are you mad at me?” which was weird and really surprised me.

“Why would I be?”

“Because I abandoned you on Sunday.”

“I'm not mad at you. I haven't been mad about anything since I was five.”

“Still,” Uchida said, staring at his toes. “I did run away. That was bad!”

“It was the smart choice. If you'd stuck around, you'd just have gotten caught, too. Personally, I think you not getting caught was the best aspect of that situation.”

“You do? I was being smart?”

“I think so.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said, cheering up.

In the corner of the classroom, Suzuki and his group were standing with several girls, making a racket. “Hamamoto and Suzuki are playing chess,” Uchida informed me. “Suzuki challenged her to a match.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Suzuki made fun of her, so Hamamoto baited him into it.”

“Whatever will we do with him...?”

I told Uchida how Suzuki and his minions had pissed on my notebook and stolen our exploration map, and Uchida got really upset. “That’s so mean! How could they?!”

“But I made a copy of the notes. Don’t worry. We can redraw the exploration map. I think it would be more efficient to make a new one than to try to get it back from Suzuki.”

“You don’t even get mad at Suzuki.”

“If I feel myself getting mad, I just think about breasts. That always calms my heart.”

“I admire that about you, Aoyama, but I don’t think you should be thinking about that stuff too much.”

“About breasts?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like you shouldn’t.”

“I don’t think about them all the time. Only about thirty minutes a day.”

Every break that day, Suzuki and Hamamoto faced off over the chessboard. Suzuki tried to distract Hamamoto, moving the pieces while she wasn’t looking and generally sabotaging the game, but he couldn’t find a way to beat her. Hamamoto was good. After school, the entire class was gathered around the board. Suzuki was beet red, and Hamamoto was cool as a cucumber. I took a look at the board, and Suzuki’s position was beyond salvation. He thought for a really long time before making any moves, but Hamamoto always made her moves immediately. Her motions were so precise, like a little robot girl lining up pieces of chocolate. I was very impressed.

At last, Suzuki looked up from the chessboard and yelled, “What?” at me.

“Nothing. Just watching.”

“Don’t! Don’t watch!”

Then he claimed I’d distracted him, and he messed up all the pieces. After that, he stormed out of class, dragging his minions with him. I shook my head, but Hamamoto didn’t seem the least bit upset. She just put the pieces away, muttering “Can’t even call that a match,” like she was singing in a pasture. Both Uchida and I agreed Hamamoto

was very strong.

On the way home, Uchida and I split up, and I went to the dentist's office.

I sat on the white couch like I always did, a magazine from the rack spread out on the table in front of me. I'd found one with a feature on cosmology, so I was totally absorbed in reading it. Page after page of beautiful illustrations and text. I definitely think I know a lot about outer space, but even for me, this article was pretty difficult. *I have to do a lot more research*, I thought. When he was done fixing my teeth, I said as much to the dentist, and he said, "Feel free to take it home." The dentist was always willing to aid my research.

"Is the lady out today?"

"She called in sick," the dentist said. "You worried about her?"

"I am."

He smiled and patted me on the head but said nothing more.

I went back to the waiting room, and the receptionist said, "I've got a postcard for you." The postcard had a photo of a penguin standing in the middle of a field of snow. There was an arrow pointing at the penguin and a note that said *You are here*. In the lady's handwriting.



Notes on a dream I had.

The lady was standing on a rocky shore. Nothing else around. Not a single plant in sight. I somehow just knew this was the Cambrian-period sea. Dreams were strange that way. Across the sea, lightning flashed like I'd seen in a documentary about Africa. The sky was a deep blue but with a pale glow. The same sky I saw through the blinds when I woke up earlier than all the other kids in town.

I remember the lady's face as she stood there on that rocky protrusion. She looked very sleepy and somehow sad. She picked up a stone lying by her feet. The surface of the stone was shiny, like it was made of aluminum. She rolled it around her palm, and it gave off a cold, hard light.

The lady tucked the stone between her breasts, as if to warm it. Eventually, she decided it was warm enough and threw it at the sea. The stone spun in the air, glittering, wobbling like a water balloon... and then inflated. Glowing silver bubbles rose up on the stone's surface, each pushed aside by the one that came after, swallowed up by it. Like a violent chemical reaction. The stone got larger and larger until it was bigger than me, bigger than the lady. It hit the surface of the water and grew larger still.

At last, it became a giant, silver blue whale.

That blue whale had evolved into us—for some reason, this thought made perfect sense to me. The idea that the lady had made us was very pleasing. And yet, she looked sleepy and sad. I wanted her to tell me why she looked so unhappy.



The school grounds were a square, 180 meters on each side.

When I was in third grade, I spent September and October researching square things. Every time I found something square in town, I made a record of it. I liked squares and thought it was wonderful how the town was laid out like graph paper all the way to the horizon.

Eventually, I began studying triangles and circles and curves, but even now, I still like squares the best. I like graph paper and still get happy when I find a square vacant lot. The school I went to was a square sitting in the middle of a square plot, so it looked like the katakana ro (□).

Uchida and I had once walked all the way around the perimeter of the school grounds.

After school, taking care that the teachers didn't spot us, we'd walked past the schoolyard fence, the empty grass fields, and the parking lot. This expedition confirmed that the grounds were an exact square. Behind the incinerator, we found a second entrance to the property: a small square door in the concrete-block wall. We also discovered an open drainage canal in the field next to the school.

We'd recorded these findings on our map. Suzuki may have stolen it, but our discoveries were still etched in my brain.



School let out early on Wednesday, so Uchida and I decided to follow the drainage canal. An investigation into where the water came from—its source. I had dubbed this expedition Project Amazon, which Uchida really liked. It was a shame I couldn't continue my Penguin Highway research, but I was juggling a lot of different research projects. If one reached an impasse, I figured it best to work on another.

After school, we went out the secret door behind the incinerator, climbed the school fence, and cut across the grass. It was cloudy, but I could tell we didn't need to worry about rain. Every now and then, the sun peeked out from between the gray clouds, lighting up the grass field as if we'd been underwater and suddenly breached the surface.

The sun would only stay out for a moment, though, and our surroundings would quickly grow gloomy again. Like someone was flicking the sky's light switch on and off.

We walked forward, keeping an eye on our compass. Uchida was waving around a stalk of grass he'd yanked up.

"Apparently, they were gonna build a kindergarten here," he said.

"But there's nothing here."

"I wonder if they canceled construction. Or decided to build it somewhere else."

"I wish it was a train station," I said. "If there was a station right next to our school, that would be extremely convenient."

The canal we were exploring ran from east to west. It was about a meter wide and made of concrete. The water itself was deep, probably able to reach up to our chests. The far side of the ditch was covered in broad-leaved bamboo. Searching for the source, our party set out to the north.

"Uchida, make sure you don't fall in."

"I wonder what it's like where the water starts? Is it like a spring? Or a well?" Uchida speculated. "Aoyama, have you ever seen a well?"

"I'm familiar with the concept."

"A really deep well would be scary. It would be like a black hole."

The underbrush got thicker and thicker, making it hard for our party to progress. We tried walking on the edge of the canal, but it was so overgrown that we had to push the foliage away to make any progress. Every now and then, we could see fish in the water. I looked back and found I could no longer see the school. Only the fence around the schoolyard.

Eventually, we came to a fence covered in arrowroot leaves. The ditch continued past it, so we hesitated awhile but eventually hopped it. After all, the source of the stream might have been waiting beyond.

The fence surrounded a square piece of land about 250 meters on each side. There was a reservoir shaped like an upside-down pyramid. The drain connected to it. The water was only at the very bottom, so we didn't need to worry about falling in. The slopes leading to the reservoir were shored up with concrete blocks. There were green plants sprouting from the gaps, and in the water grew what looked like space plants with sausage-shaped bodies. Grass grew thick around the reservoir's edge. I didn't think anyone ever came here. It felt like we'd discovered a ruin from ancient times.

Inside the reservoir was a small gray tower. A narrow bridge extended to it from the bank. We went to the end of the bridge, but there was a lock on it that kept us out.

"Does someone live here?" Uchida asked, getting nervous.

"I don't know, but I think that's just for storing equipment that

measures the water volume. With the grass this high, I bet even the waterworks people have forgotten about this place.”

“Does the water come from here?”

“I don’t think so. There’s another drain over there, right? I think water flows here from somewhere else and then collects here for a while. That way, the river water doesn’t overflow.”

“Aha!” Uchida said, impressed. “Makes sense.”

I spread out the blanket at the edge of the reservoir.

Uchida and I called this blanket our base. My sister had drooled all over it when she was a baby, but having been washed often by my mother, it was safe now. It was far more useful than a hand-me-down from my sister had any right to be. It was bright pea green and square. It could fold up very small, and we could set up base anywhere we liked. Absolutely a necessary item for any expedition.

Sitting on the base, I jotted down some notes on the reservoir. Uchida whistled.

It was quiet here. The school was far enough away that we couldn’t even hear the bell ring.

I mentioned the dentist had given me a magazine about space, and Uchida was jealous. Then he started explaining the theory that “Space was born from nothing.” I remembered the same magazine mentioning that.

“I wonder what nothing is like,” I said.

“I think it’s different from just empty. If your stomach is empty, you don’t say ‘My stomach has become nothing.’”

“It’s a much bigger kind of empty—like, so empty our stomachs no longer exist, either.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty incredible.”

“Definitely. The idea of no time or space.”

“What’s it like having no time or space? That’s a very difficult concept to grasp.”

“If there’s no space, then there’s nowhere for us to sit, and if time isn’t flowing, then we can’t even think, ‘There’s no time here.’”

Uchida considered this for a minute. “Kinda scary,” he concluded. “I wonder if that’s where we go when we die.”

“Maybe that’s where we were before we were born.”

“Oh yeah.”

“But I don’t remember it at all.”

Uchida screwed up his face. “Thinking about this stuff makes my head spin. Like it’s just going round and round.”

While we were sitting on the blanket, the underbrush on the opposite side of the reservoir started rustling. That wasn’t the wind. There was an animal of some kind in the brush. I looked up, closing

my notebook. Uchida grabbed my arm, frightened.

There was a squeaking noise, and a penguin appeared. It didn't seem to care that we were there; it just waddled toward the edge of the reservoir. Then it stood there like a Greek philosopher.

"What's it doing?" Uchida asked. "Where'd that penguin come from?"

"I dunno," I said. I was lying to him.

Only I knew where the penguins came from, but I'd decided not to share this discovery with anyone for a while yet. Not even Uchida.

If they found out the lady had the power to create penguins, government laboratories or universities would send all kinds of investigators to our town. They'd study her, uncover the means to create infinite penguins, and inform the world's penguinologists. If that happened, I'd never be able to see the lady. I wouldn't be able to research the Penguin Highway anymore. And that would be a real shame.

I didn't want to lie to Uchida, but this particular research had to be conducted in secret.

We stayed sitting on the edge of the reservoir until the penguin wandered off into the brush again.



Seaside Café had a big skylight, and the owner, Yamaguchi, used a special long pole to open that window. There was a large model of a whale hanging next to the skylight. Sunlight would shine in through the skylight, giving the whale a dull-silver gleam. Its spindle-shaped body would sway from side to side, its wide mouth grinning cockily. It looked like a spaceship from the distant future, so I always paid my respects to the whale.

I asked Yamaguchi what kind of whale it was once, and he just said, "Look it up." He would let me look through his telescope, but other times, he just gave me homework. I observed the model carefully, took copious notes, and compared those to an illustrated book at the library. Once I'd determined that it was a blue whale, Yamaguchi let me have a cream soda.

Blue whales were of the infraorder *Cetacea*, the family *Balaenopteridae*, and their scientific name was *Balaenoptera musculus*. All whales are large, but blue whales are especially large. They could be longer than thirty meters. It was astonishing that there were animals in the ocean so big they wouldn't fit in the twenty-five-meter pool at school.

I was very impressed by big things. After all, I was very small.

Even blue whale babies are born seven meters long, and they

weigh two tons. A baby whale rolling over in its sleep could easily flatten me. I imagined these babies must have very big poops. Far larger than mine. Everything about them was impressive.

I often talked about blue whales with the lady at Seaside Café.

She always smiled when I talked about baby blue whales.



I woke up early, filled my rucksack with experiment equipment, and set out for Kamonohashi Park.

The neighborhood was always quiet on Sunday mornings.

As I passed Seaside Café, Yamaguchi waved at me through the window, so I waved back. I followed the bus route. A warm breeze blew from the southwest, making the leaves sparkle. The sky was dotted with white clouds, like little sheep. I plucked the stem of a plant from a vacant lot and waved it like a conductor's baton as I walked.

There were people gathered in Kamonohashi Park for morning exercises. There was fitness equipment placed alongside the benches and the path. There were people out walking their dogs and people sweating on the equipment. The dentist was doing crunches with a towel around his neck, so I said hello.

The church was next to Kamonohashi Park. It held mass every Sunday morning. I knew the lady always attended. The town church was about as big as my house, much smaller than the big European cathedrals I'd seen on TV. But there was a cross on the roof, so it was a real church. I sat on a park bench, writing in my notebook, waiting for mass to end and the lady to come out.

At last I saw her leaving church and waved. "Good morning," I said.

"Morning," she said. "Sunbathing?"

She sat down next to me. Her head slumped. She was pretending to sleep.

"Sleepy?" I asked.

"Was up all night. Weird dreams. I'm bushed."

"That's concerning," I said. "Can I ask for your help in an experiment?"

She yawned. "Experiment? What kind?"

I lowered my voice, taking every precaution. "A penguin experiment," I whispered.

"You solve the mystery?" she whispered back.

"Not at all. That's why I want to do an experiment."

"Hmm. Will the experiment lead to a solution?"

"We won't know until we try. Will you assist me in this matter?"

“Sure. I’m sleepy, but sure.”

For our experiment grounds, I selected the bus terminal where she’d first shown me how she made penguins. There was little chance of being seen there. As we followed the bus route toward the terminal, I tried to wheedle a hint out of her, one that would help me solve the mystery. But she just blinked sleepily and stared up at the sky. “I feel like no penguins will show up today,” she said. I couldn’t tell if she meant this or was just teasing me like she always did.

“Honestly, I don’t know why I can do it. I just find myself in a good mood, get fidgety, and then a penguin shows up. Plop.”

“Is it always throwing a Coke can? Like when you showed me?”

“Not always, no.”

“So you’re not clear what the principle is?”

“It’s your job to figure that out.”

“Can you only produce penguins? I’d like to see some other animals. Like a bat.”

“Greedy! I can’t make bats.” She sighed. “You don’t seem to be taking this seriously.”

“I have been serious since the moment I was born.”

The bus terminal on Sunday was empty, not a soul in sight. I checked the schedule in the waiting room and discovered we had half an hour before the next bus. The lady stood in the middle of the terminal, squinting her eyes at the sky above.

I set my rucksack down and began lining up the items I’d brought with me. A camera borrowed from my father and a notebook to record everything. An empty jam jar I’d asked my mother for in the kitchen, an empty tin of the hard candy that I’d sucked on between rounds of research, a softball I used sometimes when Uchida came over to play, a small square cushion from the living room couch, and a glasses case my father no longer needed. I set these up in a circle around the lady.

“What are these?” she said, frowning.

“Test samples,” I said. “I want to see if these turn into penguins or not.”

“You want me to stand here and throw all of these?”

“Yes. I was standing over here, right?”

“I forget. It’s been a long while since then.”

The sky was fairly clear, there was a nice breeze blowing, and I could hear the larks singing in the distance. There was no one else in the terminal. I wrote an itemized list of the conditions on the previous occasion, making it so I could check them off. I went through each carefully. All clear. I started our experiment.

The jam jar, candy tin, softball, cushion, and glasses case each flew through the air in turn. I stood ready with the camera, but nothing happened. I bought a can of Coke from the vending machine

and had her throw that, with the same results. What was different? I reread my notes and remembered that the can had spun in the air like a spaceship creating internal gravity. I asked her to throw it one more time.

“Again?”

“In the spirit of experiment.”

“Right. You are a science kid.”

But the result was the same. Nothing happened. Just in case, I even had her tie a string to my tooth, made her hold it, and had her throw a can like that. This also ended in failure.



Experiments failing was always sad.

I considered other conditions. My tooth being loose, the time of day being the afternoon, me being tied to the vending machine, my notebook being covered in Suzuki and company's piss; there were a number of other potential factors. But none of them seemed to have anything to do with the penguin manifestation.

As I scowled at my notes, the lady came over.

“You can't rush it,” she said. “I had a feeling it wouldn't happen today.”

“Are you sure you really can't? Is it possible that you're only teasing me?”

I regretted this childish outburst the moment I said it. Just because the experiment had failed didn't give me the right to cast suspicion on the lady when she was helping me out. Before I tried blaming her, I should have reevaluated my hypothesis.

“Then have fun doing this alone,” she snapped, starting to walk away.

While I stuffed the experiment equipment into my rucksack, she went up the concrete stairs that led to the back of the athletic field. When I hastily tried to cross the street after her, she shouted “Look both ways!” so loud it echoed. I stopped dead in my tracks, as if she'd cast a spell on me. I looked right, then left, then right again, and then crossed the street. But by this point, she was already at the top of the stairs.

I ran up the long stairs to the back of the athletic field and looked around the overgrown patch between the field and the stairs. This was where Uchida and I had fought the Suzuki Empire. High-tension towers loomed over the wasteland. A gloomy forest lurked on one side. It was the same forest that was behind the hill with the water tower. Exploring a forest this size was dangerous, and Uchida and I had not yet managed to map it.

The wind carried a pleasant aroma, and the plants swayed like waves in the sea. The lady was standing on the shore of this sea. Holding her hair in place, looking around. "There's nothing here," she murmured.

I went over to her and said, "I'm sorry. That was childish of me."

"You're a child, so that's just fine."

"I'm scheduled to be a grown-up in another three thousand eight hundred and eleven days."

"Good lord, you're actually counting?"

Not far from us, a lark took off from the field, singing. It flew straight up and vanished into the sky like it was riding on a space elevator. The lady watched the lark go, one hand on her forehead. The lark was quickly out of sight, but we could still hear it singing. My neck hurt.

"This lot's vacant," the lady said, looking around. "Wonder if they're planning on building something here."

"Maybe a new station."

"A railroad going all the way to the sea?"

"Yes."

"Nice. Close to the office, too."

"If that happens, the Seaside Café really will be near the sea."

"Cool. Let's explore a bit!" the lady said. It seemed she was no longer mad at me.

We walked across the field. She pointed at the forest on our right. "You been in there?"

"A little, but we haven't explored the depths of it. Forests can be dangerous, so precautions are necessary."

"You might meet a Jabberwock."

"What's a Jabberwock?"

"A monster from a book."

As we got near the towers, the lady said, "Let's rest here," so I decided to make a base. I took the pea-green blanket out of my rucksack and spread it on the ground.

"This is our base," I said.

"Kidido, this is a blanket."

"It's a base."

The lady sat down on the little blanket. "Feels good," she said, looking up at the sky. "A base, hmm? I can dig it."

I thought this every time, but by making a base with this blanket, the scenery was completely transformed. The sky and land both seemed wider than they did on foot. I took the science magazine the dentist gave me out of my rucksack and read it. While I was passionately studying an article on black holes, the lady leaned against my back. Her back was a curious temperature, both warm and

somehow cool.

“Sorry I couldn’t make any penguins.” Her voice carried over my shoulder.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

“Maybe I’ll never make another. Maybe I just got lucky that time.”

“I’m sure there’s a rule somewhere.”

“And you think you can figure that out when I can’t?”

“I am very intelligent.”

“You’re very confident anyway.”

The wind brushing across the grass was pleasantly warm. Listening to the sound of the wind, I felt like I was conducting a survey from a base at the ends of the earth. The lady turned her head, peering over my shoulder at the article I was reading.

“Even the boss was struggling to get through that one. I’m amazed you can read it.”

“I understand some parts of it, and I don’t understand other parts of it. I have to consult other books sometimes to get through it.”

“Anything interesting written there?”

“The event horizon is really cool.”

“The what now?”

“When a really big star gets old, it becomes unable to withstand its own gravity and collapses. Once that happens, the gravity keeps pulling everything toward the center, so it keeps shrinking. It shrinks so much all the matter gets compressed, and the gravitational force gets even stronger. If this keeps going, the gravity gets so strong that even light can’t escape. At that point, you can no longer observe what’s happening from the outside. The boundary between what can be observed and what can’t is called the event horizon.”

“Hmm.”

That was all she said. She wasn’t very interested in outer space.

Then she made a surprised noise, looking toward the forest. I jumped, wondering if the Jabberwock had shown up, but there was a little girl standing at the edge of the forest.

“Hamamoto,” I said. “She’s in my class.”

“A girl shouldn’t be walking alone around here.”

Hamamoto seemed to be thinking about something. She was treading slowly along the border between the field and the forest. Then she walked off toward the athletic field. I couldn’t tell if she’d seen the lady and me sitting there.



Notes on classroom rumors.

A silver moon appears over the hill with the water tower. This is

not the real moon, but a ghost moon. The penguins go in and out of the surface of the silver moon. Any kids who see this happen get sick.

So don't look at the water-tower hill at night.

And don't ever go in that forest.



The next week, after school, Uchida and I went to the city library together.

I liked the city library better than the school library. The collection was much more varied, and they had comfortable brown couches to sit on. I always sat on the same couch. It was hidden in the bookcases like a secret lair, and if I looked up from the book I was reading, I could see the garden through the picture windows. In the garden was a big, silver, shiny statue like a giant egg. When I'd used my brain too much, and it got tired, staring at this silver egg was a great way to rest it. I felt like staring at the shiny silver egg made my mind work better.

I had a notebook on my knee, and I was making notes in tiny handwriting about anything interesting I found in the book. This way, I could remember the important points without having to borrow the book.

I was sitting on the couch reading a book on the theory of relativity that the librarian had recommended. I hadn't really understood the magazine the dentist had given me, so I was reading other books as further research.

As I read, I wrote $E = mc^2$ in my notes. A strange equation.

My father had taught me about the principles of equations, so I understood what this equation meant. Until second grade, I'd thought $=$ meant "The answer is?" Like, " $2 + 2$ is ?" But this was incorrect. $=$ meant that what was on the left and what was on the right were the same value. When my father told me that, it was like my world was turned upside down. I remember it clearly—a very strange sensation.

Uchida was on the couch next to me reading a book on penguins.

"Penguins definitely do eat fish," Uchida said.

"Penguins are great at swimming in the ocean," I said. "They go off like space rockets."

"I wonder if our penguins eat fish, too?"

Uchida was talking about the penguins that had appeared in our neighborhood. I thought about this. After all, these penguins had started out as Coke cans. Did Coke cans eat fish?

"I don't know, but I guess they probably do," I said. I wasn't at all certain, though.

“There aren’t a lot of fish around here.”

“There were a few little fish in that drain. But it’s possible the penguins are hungry.”

“Do you think those penguins are ghosts?”

“Why?”

“There’s a rumor going around. About a ghost moon. Have you heard it, Aoyama?”

“I made a note of it. But that’s just a rumor. We’ve seen the penguins a number of times, but nobody’s gotten sick. Without solid evidence to back that rumor up, I’m not scared.”

“Right. Good point.” Uchida looked a little relieved. He glanced at my notebook. “Is that English?”

“It’s a formula. Math.”

“You know a lot about math, huh? That’s amazing.”

As I was telling him about $E = mc^2$, Uchida suddenly looked surprised. Hamamoto was standing in the aisle between the shelves. I’d never seen her at the library before. Her chestnut hair was sparkling. She had a book clutched to her chest. She wasn’t a grown-up yet, so she didn’t have any breasts.

Hamamoto came down the aisle toward us.

She looked down at my notes and whispered, “The theory of relativity?” I was very surprised. I didn’t think anyone else my age knew about the theory of relativity.

“I’ve read that book. You understand it, Aoyama?”

“It’s a little difficult. I don’t have a full grasp of it yet.”

“Me, neither. It’s very hard.”

The book in Hamamoto’s arms was about oceanography.

She pointed at the book Uchida was reading and said “Penguins!” with a grin. Then she walked away. Uchida and I watched her go. Just before she vanished around the edge of the bookshelves, she glanced back and stuck out her tongue like that photo of Einstein. Of course, she didn’t stick her tongue out as far as he did.

“Hamamoto is very strange,” Uchida said.

“Yes. She’s strange, but in a good way.”

“Mm. I agree. I meant it like that. Just saying strange sounds mean.”

I was reading books and taking notes and exploring, and there were other people like Hamamoto doing their own research. I regretted thinking I was the most knowledgeable child in town. Hamamoto might actually be more knowledgeable than me. *I’d better be more careful*, I thought.

Not letting my pride get the best of me was one of my better qualities.

On my father's three principles.

When my father showed me how to solve problems, he taught me three useful ways of thinking about them. I've written these on the back cover of my notebook so I can check them anytime. They're very helpful when solving math problems. This list is below.

- ☐ Break the problem into smaller pieces.
- ☐ Change the way you look at it.
- ☐ Look for a similar problem.

I think we can divide the Penguin Highway research into two main areas of consideration. The Lady and The Penguins. I like the lady, so I'd been focusing all my research efforts on her. That's why I'd gotten stuck. If I changed how I looked at it, this was really a mystery about the penguins. I should have been researching the penguins.

And I needed to look for a similar problem.

This was an extremely unusual problem. Was there anything like it?

Project Amazon.

Uchida and I followed the drain canal behind the school back to that reservoir. It was a humid day and quite hot, as if summer had suddenly arrived. It seemed like the plants along the drain were getting bigger.

Uchida was particularly silent that day. On days like this, I practiced being silent myself. Being silent all day was actively painful, but I could manage about two hours without much issue. I pushed past the broad-leaved bamboo without a word, thinking about my lack of progress on the Penguin Highway research.

We made it to the reservoir again. It had rained the day before, so the water level was a little bit higher. We walked around the perimeter of the reservoir to the drain that emptied into it. There was another fence on that side.

Last time, we had called off our exploration here. Today we were pressing farther on.

We climbed the fence and followed the narrow path next to the drain. The broad-leaved bamboo grew high here, as well, and it was rather dark. At last, we emerged from the broad-leaved bamboo and found ourselves in an area with a number of rice paddies surrounded

by bamboo groves. Paved roads and drains snaked between the rice paddies. Every now and then, there was a small metal sluice gate. There was water in the paddies, but nothing growing yet.

“Like we’ve gone back in time,” Uchida said, breaking his silence.

“But the shopping mall’s just over there,” I said, pointing past the bamboo grove. We could just catch a glimpse of the huge mall we sometimes went to on weekends.

We walked through the paddies. The humidity had us sweating.

Along the way, we found a strange path branching off from the paved road into the paddies. There were pine trees on either side. At the end of the road was a Shinto shrine on the verge of being swallowed by the bamboo grove. Uchida and I made a base on the stone stairs under the shrine’s traditional-looking gate, drank some cold tea, and wiped away our sweat. The thermos sparkled like a device used for experiments in outer space. We made a note of the shrine on the new map we’d started.

“See, this one’s already more detailed than the one Suzuki stole.”

“Yeah,” Uchida said happily.

“They won’t find this shrine looking at that map.”

Our break finished, we started walking through the paddies again. Beyond the paddies and the bamboo groves, we could see a road. We saw big trucks and family sedans passing by.

“Aoyama, you should defeat Suzuki once and for all,” Uchida said. “And then establish a new Aoyama Empire.”

“I won’t create an empire. I don’t want to be an emperor. And if there was an Aoyama Empire, the two of us wouldn’t be able to explore freely.”

“True,” Uchida said after thinking this over. “Maybe we’re better off the way things are.”

The road had two lanes for traffic in each direction, and there were a lot of cars on it. This was the national highway. The drainage canal went through a tunnel under the highway and out the other side. The tunnel was very dark, so we were very careful going through, but thankfully, the walking path continued the entire distance.

We came out the other side of the tunnel and discovered that the drain hit a parking lot and made a hard turn to the right. We stopped and made some observations about the abandoned parking lot. There was a large broken-down car still sitting there. It looked like this lot once belonged to a restaurant built along the side of the highway, but the restaurant had gone out of business. This place may have been here long before our neighborhood was started. The building had an impressive roof, like a Japanese castle, and it was covered in crows.

“We’ve come a long way,” Uchida said, looking nervous.

The drain kept going past the parking lot and restaurant. There were plants growing thick on both sides. Every time the crows squawked, Uchida tugged at my clothes.

"I wonder how far the drain goes," I murmured. "Maybe to the ends of the earth."

"That far?"

"I always feel like that's the case. When I'm in the car with my father, I feel like if we follow this road, it would take us all the way to the ends of the earth."

"I wonder what that's like."

"I don't know. But I bet there's absolutely nothing there. Maybe a little research laboratory dedicated to observing the ends of the earth. Beyond that point, none shall pass. That's how I imagine it anyway."

"Sounds scary."

"I don't really think so. I'd really like to visit a place like that."

When we first moved to this town, I was still only seven.

Now I'd done a lot of exploring with Uchida and driving with my father, and I knew more about the world. But back then, my world had still been very small. My house had been built in the middle of a huge vacant lot, and to my eyes, it was like my house was a laboratory observing the ends of the earth. To seven-year-old me, it had felt like we'd come a very long way from the town in the next prefecture I'd grown up in. We were at the edges of the world, and if we crossed that next hill, there'd be no more world left. I felt like I had a duty to explore the world's furthest reaches.

So as often as I could, I woke up early on Sunday and went out exploring the town. Even now that I knew the ends of the earth were a lot farther away, I was still exploring with Uchida.

"Aoyama, do you really think this water is flowing from the ends of the earth?"

"I don't really think so," I said. "I just think it would be nice if it was."

"The earth is round, after all," Uchida said. "There isn't any end to it."

"True. The real end of the world is at the far reaches of the universe."

But there was another version of me deep inside that didn't feel that way. Even though I knew the earth was round, I felt like there was an end to the world that I could walk to. I don't know why. Uchida and I knew each other well, so it's a shame I couldn't explain this properly.

We fell silent again, following the drain.

Suddenly, we came to a clearing where the trees overhanging the drain peeled back, and it got very bright. There was a new green fence

built along the drain. The forest there had been cut away and cleaned up recently, leaving vacant lots ready for new houses. Just like our neighborhood looked before it filled up. The most surprising thing was that the back of the mall we always went to was quite close by. It felt like we'd arrived back in civilization after a long journey in the wilderness.

Uchida and I went to the mall's food court. We sat down on a bench and drank some soft drinks. Buying a can of soda after a big expedition made us feel really grown-up.

While he drank, Uchida was thinking.

"Aoyama," he said. Then for a long time, he didn't say anything else. When he did this, I never tried to rush him. I didn't like having anyone rush me when I was trying to think, and if I didn't like something, I wouldn't do it to anyone else.

At last, Uchida said, "Mm, okay, I'm gonna say it."

"What?"

"I've been researching penguins in secret. Like you do."

"Oh? You have?"

"And I've discovered something very odd. I've been keeping it a secret, but my research isn't getting anywhere with just me. I didn't want to ask for help, but I've decided I don't mind if it's you, Aoyama."

"What research have you been doing?"

Uchida lowered his voice and said quite proudly, "I've been keeping a penguin."



Uchida had moved from the other side of the prefecture line this year, in March.

Every day, his father got on a train that passed through tunnels running underneath a mountain on the prefecture border to get to work. The place Uchida's dad worked was on a small island between two canals. Like my father, he waited at the bus stop early in the morning and got back home after it was dark. I thought it would be neat if our fathers rode the same bus.

When I moved to this town, the apartment complex Uchida lived in hadn't been built yet. The town had developed at a fearsome pace after I moved here. Back when I used to go out searching for the ends of the world every Sunday, I might have seen Uchida's apartment complex being built against the side of that hill.

I went over to Uchida's apartment.

So he could show me his secret.

On the roof of the apartment building, the wind smelled like rain.

There was a tall fence all around the roof to stop people from falling off, but through it, I could see the entire neighborhood. The sky was a patchy gray, with glimpses of blue through the gaps in the clouds. I could see my house and Kamonohashi Park and the hill with the water tower.

While I was admiring the view, Uchida went somewhere and came back walking very slowly. A little penguin was following after him, as if it had mistaken Uchida for its mother. The penguin stopped along the way, as if it had just remembered something. Uchida turned around and wriggled his body at it, and the penguin wriggled back. It clearly liked Uchida.

After a little while, the penguin started walking again. It stood next to me and puffed out its chest.

"I found it in the building parking lot and hid it up here," Uchida said, clearly very proud of himself.

"I'm surprised nobody found it."

"It hides if people come."

"What a smart penguin."

"Yes. It is my penguin, after all."

Uchida knelt down, facing the penguin.

Even when he touched its belly, the penguin just moved its beak a little. It didn't cry out or purr like a cat. Only stared into the distance. Maybe it was thinking about Antarctica. This must be a very strange place to a penguin. If I found myself all alone on Antarctica surrounded by penguins, I'd be pretty lonely. Also, I doubt I could survive the cold.

But then I remembered that this penguin had once been a Coke can. This penguin had never been to Antarctica. Their mother was the lady, and this was their only home.

"So the thing I'm worried about..." Uchida said, staring down at it. "...is this penguin doesn't eat anything. It hasn't eaten a single thing since it came here."

"That's not good."

"Yeah. The book in the library said they eat fish, but I gave it fish, and it didn't eat them. I tried ham and cucumbers and *onigiri*, but it didn't eat any of them. No matter what I put in front of it, it just stares off in the distance."

"But it seems pretty plump and healthy."

"What should I do...? Aoyama, do you know?"

Uchida's experiment flew in the face of expectations. The penguins the lady made flapped their wings and waddled all round. They definitely needed some form of energy to keep that up. If the penguins didn't eat food, then we had to assume they were deriving energy from some other source. Some unknown energy source. E =

Penguin Energy. I took out my notebook and wrote *Penguin Energy* in it.

Soon the penguin started waddling around us. In a big circle, like it was orbiting Uchida. Uchida looked happy. "It's a mystery, right?"

"Penguin Energy. A very curious mystery. I'll have to research it."

"You think it has something to do with the theory of relativity?"

"Too soon to say."

Uchida put his hand on the penguin's head. "Promise not to tell anyone there's a penguin here?"

"I promise. I can keep a secret."



Saturday evening, I went to Seaside Café.

At night, the lights of the café spilled out through the windows. There were no other customers, only the lady sitting in the window, resting her face on her hand. I could tell she'd already finished her studying.

I went in the café, but the lady's eyes stayed closed. The café lights shone on her cheek. She seemed even paler than usual. On the table was a book called *Through the Looking-Glass*. This was the book the Jabberwock appeared in. Until she woke up, I sat and read. I saw the picture of a boy with a sword fighting the Jabberwock for the first time. If something like this was really living in the forest like the lady had suggested, even I would be at my wit's end. I could see no path to victory. I opened my notebook and copied the drawing of the Jabberwock. I think I did a pretty good job.

At last, the lady's eyes fluttered open.

"Sorry, kiddo. Guess I nodded off."

"Are you still sleepy?"

"I definitely need more sleep at night. Keep having scary dreams."

"What sort of dreams?"

The lady's dreams are detailed below.

She was sitting on the couch in the dentist's waiting room, like always. There was a light on at the reception desk, but no one was there. The waiting room was dimly lit, only the pale-blue light of dawn streaming in through the window. There was something wrong with the potted plants in the corner of the room. It was like a plastic tube was growing out of the pot. The end of the tube widened like a trumpet. For some reason, the lady knew this was a plant that had long ago gone extinct. There was someone else sitting with her on the couch. At first, the lady thought it was me. But the person sitting there was taller, like a grown-up. Their body was pale, wet, and glistening. She couldn't make out their face. The lady said it was a Jabberwock.

The Jabberwock was muttering something. It sounded like tiny bubbles popping, and she couldn't work out any words. The lady thought she wanted to leave the waiting room, but she couldn't because no one would call for her.

"Dreams like that. Nasty, right?"

"What are you waiting for, there?"

"I don't know."

I remembered dreaming about the lady. The dream where she was standing by the Cambrian-period sea, where she turned a stone into a blue whale.

"You've got some weird dreams, too. I can't make blue whales."

She fell silent for a while, eyes focused on nothing.

"You look sleepy," I said.

"Mm. I am."

Then we played chess. I talked about what I'd read in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

"It's a world all about chess."

"That's why I thought you should read it. Alice starts out as a pawn but ends up as a queen."

"I'd rather be a knight."

"Scheming to leapfrog yourself into adulthood?"

The lady was the one teaching me to play chess, but she was also unfortunately prone to making wrong moves. Whenever she picked up a piece, I had to watch carefully. For the sake of her honor, let me state for the record that she was not trying to cheat like Suzuki did. She could just be careless sometimes.

The lady did not seem to be in great shape tonight, so I was concerned. I wondered if her state of mind was connected to the penguin emergence. One potential hypothesis was that producing penguins made the lady's well-being deteriorate. Especially considering the question of the Penguin Energy discovered through Uchida's experiment. The exact process was a mystery, but perhaps the penguins were living off the lady's energy.

"Maybe you shouldn't make any more penguins," I said softly.

"Why not?"

"Maybe that's making you feel like this."

"Oh? I dunno. But I really like making penguins." She smiled.

"What was it you wanted me to make?"

"Bats. Blue whales would be too big."

"They'd crush us."

"But I'm serious. I'm worried about you."

"Thanks."

Just then, the lights in the Seaside Café went out, plunging us into darkness. I didn't know what was happening. The lady whispered,

“What’s going on?” It was dark in the street outside. Yamaguchi had been behind the counter, cleaning up, and I heard him say, “Power outage?”

“Are you scared, Aoyama?” the lady asked. Her voice in the darkness felt extremely comforting.

“I’m not scared of power outages. But they do make me sleepy.”

“Humans can’t handle darkness.”

“If I were a bat, I’d be fine. I would be able to see with sonar.”

I tried to make out the lady’s face through the darkness, but no matter how hard I strained my eyes, I saw nothing. I peered patiently into the darkness, not moving, and felt a faint breeze brushing against my face. I slowly looked up. The wind appeared to be originating from above the chessboard.

“There’s a strange phenomenon occurring,” I said.

“I noticed that myself.”

The wind from above the chessboard was getting stronger. Eventually, there was a popping sound, like a bunch of large bubbles bursting. This made the wind get even stronger, and something came out of the chessboard, flapping its wings. The lady yelped and bent over backward, and Yamaguchi yelled, “What the...?!” I just sat there stunned, feeling one black gale after another fly out of the chessboard.

The power outage ended, and the lights turned on. There was not a single piece left on the chessboard. But there were a ton of bats on the ceiling around the model of the blue whale. “How’d they get in here?” Yamaguchi exclaimed.

The lady seemed equally surprised. “I did it!” she whispered.

“How did that happen?”

“I don’t know! It’s your job to figure this out!” she said.

“I see.”

She reached out and hooked her pinkie in mine.

That was the first time I’d ever touched her fingers. They felt totally different from when her fingers were in my mouth at the dentist’s office. They felt so thin and fragile, like they could break at any moment, and as cold as glass.



On Sunday, my whole family went to the mall.

The shopping mall was built after we moved here. On weekends, it filled with people from all over the neighborhood, like an amusement park. It was always shiny, like LEGOs. And it was very large. There were cafés, restaurants, boutiques, electronics stores, bookstores, even a movie theater. It was like an entire town in one building. I bet future space stations will be like this.

We split into two pairs, my sister with my mother and me with my father. We agreed to meet at the restaurant on the top floor in one hour. My sister was excited about getting some new clothes.

My father and I went to the stationery store.

I liked stationery supplies. We came here about once a month. I'd stare at compasses and rulers, notebooks in all colors, and completely lose track of time. My father always had a large notebook at hand, in which he wrote all manner of things. Sometimes he just doodled. My father really liked that notebook and would even look through it in the living room at home. He always took it with him when he went to Seaside Café. If I wanted to be like my father, I should always have a notebook with me. That's why I was so happy when he first bought me a grid-lined notebook and taught me how to use it. I was sure this meant I would one day be as important as he is.

I used a spiral-bound notebook with a grid printed in light-gray lines. It was smaller than the one my father used, which made it easier to carry everywhere. The paper was slightly thicker than average and very smooth. I could write a lot of words in ballpoint pen without my hands getting tired. It was a lot of fun to write things in a good notebook. That's why I took notes on everything. This notebook is the reason I'm so much smarter than your average elementary school student.

"Which do you want?"

My father always bought the same notebook. So I did, too.

We checked the bookstores, then went to the restaurant on the top floor. While we waited for my mother and sister to arrive, I took the new notebook out of the bag and flipped through the empty pages. These pages would soon fill up with discoveries and research and ideas. I was excited thinking of all the research results that would soon be recorded here, in my handwriting. I wanted to write something in it right away.

I looked out the restaurant window. The woods behind the shopping mall had been cleared away, and there were plots of land laid out. I could see the drain Uchida and I had followed. I'd seen it every time we left the mall, but if Uchida and I hadn't followed it, I would never have noticed it was there. I still had a lot to learn.

"Dad. Imagine there was a really hard problem."

"Mm, okay," my father said, smiling. "I'm imagining a really hard problem."

"In this case, we want to use your three principles."

"Right. Break the problem into smaller pieces. Change the way you look at it. Look for a similar problem."

"Right. But after you do that, are there times you still don't understand?"

“Of course. There are more ways to think about things. Lots of approaches.”

“For example?”

My father thought about it, then took out his new notebook. He flipped through the pages like he was reading something important written in it, saying, “For example, if you go home and try to turn on the light. You flip the switch, but nothing happens. That’s a problem. If that happened, what would you think?”

“The switch was broken.”

“Maybe it is. If you think that, then the problem becomes ‘The switch is broken.’ But what if there’s actually a power outage, like last night? Then the problem has nothing to do with the switch. Yet, because you think the switch is broken, you can investigate the switch all you like and never find an answer.”

“Because the problem isn’t with the switch.”

“So first, you need to identify what the problem actually is.”

“I’d check to see if the lights in other rooms work.”

“That’s one method. If the other lights don’t turn on, there might be a problem with the circuit breaker. But this still might not solve the problem. In that case, you’d have to check the neighbor’s houses... And as you continue looking into it, you get a better idea of what the problem actually is.”

“That makes sense.”

“This is the most important thing but also the hardest. With math problems, you have the problem written down in front of you. But in most cases, you have no idea what the problem really is. It’s easy to end up accidentally investigating the switch while having no idea there’s a power outage.”

“You make mistakes, too?”

“Of course I do. Everyone does,” my father said softly. “When you try to figure out what the problem is, you’re often wrong about it several times. But the more practice you have, the better you get at finding the real problem.”

I wrote this down in my new notebook.



I had to get to know the problem better.

- ☐ Why could the lady make penguins out of Coke cans?
- ☐ Why could the lady make bats out of chess pieces?
- ☐ Why could the lady make penguins and bats sometimes and not other times?

- ☐ What is Penguin Energy?
- ☐ Is the lady's ability related to her physical state?



June arrived with no significant progress on my Penguin Highway research.

School was peaceful. There were no standout conflicts with Suzuki and his friends.

It seemed like his group had gotten interested in exploring, using the map they stole from us. They talked about the map in class as if the things on it were their discoveries. When he heard Suzuki had formed an expedition party and followed the drain just like we had, Uchida was dejected. But after listening a little more, we discovered that Suzuki's party had headed in the opposite direction of where we had gone.

"No problem, then. They went downstream. No risk of running into them."

"But it isn't fair! We're the ones who found that stream."

"Uchida, we are searching for the source of the water. We can't explore in both directions at the same time. Suzuki's party can explore all they want to."

"You really don't get mad, Aoyama."

"Not if I think about breasts."

I definitely wanted to find out where the drainage canal led for myself. But I had a lot of other research projects on my plate already. No matter how smart I was, it was a mistake to take too much on. Handling both Project Amazon and the Penguin Highway research was more than enough for someone my age. And I was also doing research on the Suzuki Empire. I was better off leaving them be for now. I chose to believe that if we could make friends with them later, our map would be enriched as a result.

Hamamoto played chess with everyone in class and defeated every challenger but me.

She was extremely smart and good at chess. And I was extremely smart and good at chess. So when we played, the entire class gathered around. Even Suzuki was secretly watching us. My knights were very active. When Hamamoto's hands stopped moving like a chocolate factory robot and actually paused, the entire class gasped. I heard Suzuki whisper, "Get her, Aoyama!"

"Shh! Be quiet!" Hamamoto said, holding up a finger. Suzuki shut up.

She glared down at the chessboard. Her cheeks were always pale,

but today they were flushed. She brushed her chestnut hair out of her eyes. She was like a chocolate lover given a chocolate assortment, hovering over the chessboard as if trying to decide which piece to eat first.

To be strictly accurate, I only won because Hamamoto made a careless mistake. Either of us could easily have emerged victorious. That's how tense a match it was.

I really enjoyed it, and I think Hamamoto did, too. After all, when the match was over, she didn't look frustrated. Instead, she smiled, her face still red, and held out her hand for me to shake. We were worthy rivals.

"Aoyama, we should play again."

"Okay," I said.

When I was playing chess with the lady at Seaside Café, I told her about our battle. After all, she was the one who had taught me to play chess, so I thought she might praise me for it. But instead, she said, "You should have let her win. Not very grown-up of you, kiddo."

"Well, I'm not a grown-up," I argued.

"Don't pretend to be a child only when it suits you. You're letting me win right now."

Every time we met up, she asked how the Penguin Highway research was going, just to mess with me. She teased me so mercilessly about it that I found myself suspecting she really did know all the answers and was just keeping them from me. But even if I thought that, I never said it out loud. I knew if I did she'd definitely get mad.

"Kiddo, can you solve this mystery?"

"You sure you're not just having fun at my expense?"

"I totally am. Is that a problem?"

"This is a very difficult matter. My research will take time."

"Oh, but please try to hurry!" the lady said. "If you don't solve the mystery, I won't take you to the beach."



The lady came from a town on the coast.

It was right up against the water, with mountains crowding behind it, so the whole town was built on a hill that sloped down to the sea.

The lady had grown up looking down at the ocean from a house high above it. A sea breeze coming in the window, her bookshelves and clothes always smelling like the ocean. That's why, she said, her body smelled like the sea. I once got her to let me sniff her arm. It smelled good, but I couldn't be sure if it smelled like the sea.

Unfortunately, I'd never been there.

"I'll take you someday," she'd said. Her father and mother still lived in that coastal town, and apparently, they'd love it if she brought me. So we had promised to go one day. Life was born from the sea, so as a representative of humankind, I wanted to research the ocean someday.

This year, I'd heard about a new railroad line.

The train route was being extended across the mountains on the prefectural border. There would be a new station in our town. It was still in the planning stages, and there was no telling when it would be completed, my father said. But when I had heard this railroad would also connect to the town where the lady was born, I was very happy. It would make going to the sea with her a lot easier.

When we were playing chess one time, I'd told her about the new railroad.

"If we take that train, we'll be at the sea in no time," the lady had said. "That'll make this a seaside town."

It would, I'd thought.

At the time, I'd only just started playing chess with the lady, and the café we played chess in wasn't yet named Seaside Café. Back then, Yamaguchi had given it a difficult name in some foreign language that I couldn't even pronounce. The lady couldn't pronounce it, either, and neither could my father. That's how hard it was.

If the train came here and this became a seaside town, then this café would be a seaside café, and because of that, the lady changed the café's name to Seaside Café. At first, it was just me and the lady who called it that. After he heard us calling it that, Yamaguchi hung the model of the blue whale from the ceiling, making the new name seem more appropriate.

Everyone in town started calling it Seaside Café. The sign outside the café still showed the really hard foreign name, but by now, everyone had forgotten about that sign.

"Why Seaside Café?" people sometimes asked, and I would tell them about the new train that would make us a seaside town.

Logically, that meant this town was also by the sea, I'd insist.



Uchida had moved here from a town across the prefecture line, but he still had a friend back there. He sometimes called that friend or wrote letters. I looked it up, and to get where Uchida used to live required crossing the prefecture border on one train, then transferring to a different line. It was over an hour away from where we lived.

Uchida said he wanted to show the penguin to his friend in that

town.

Uchida had never taken a train alone, and carrying a penguin all that way alone would be a challenge. So I decided to help him. On Sunday, I went to Uchida's apartment building and found him waiting with a dog carrier he'd borrowed from someone in class.

The penguin was waddling around the roof. It was hot and humid, but the penguin seemed fine. I knelt down, observing it, and it didn't seem to be losing strength at all. Uchida said the penguin hadn't eaten anything in over three weeks. The mystery of the Penguin Energy only deepened. If I could discover a way to make use of Penguin Energy, I would likely win the Nobel Prize. I'd be the first person to win a Nobel Prize in elementary school.

Uchida spread out his hands, and the penguin came waddling over. It really liked Uchida. We put the penguin in the pink carrier. I touched the penguin's black wings as we did this. They were as hard as asphalt, which surprised me. The penguin's back was covered in down, much softer and less slippery than I'd imagined. Penguins are clever, so it didn't struggle in the carrier. It just sat still.

"I'm sure this is gonna be great!" Uchida said.

"For your friend?"

"Mm. It'll be awesome to see a penguin. My friend's in the hospital, so even going to the zoo isn't possible."

"Is it because of an illness?"

"Yeah. I don't know with what. But my friend's been in the hospital a long time."

"If this makes them that happy, I'll be glad."

On the bus to the station, Uchida kept putting his fingers into the carrier. The penguin would peck his fingers with its beak. Maybe this kept it relaxed. "Don't worry! Just hang in there," Uchida said.

It was my job to buy tickets at the station. When I bought the tickets and gave Uchida his, he was impressed and said, "You're like my dad, Aoyama." But I just knew how to do it and had never ridden a train on my own before.

It was a clear day, and the train interior was well lit.

"What's your friend like?"

"We used to live in the same building. Like you, my friend read a lot of books and liked researching things. Knew a lot about all kinds of things. Not just penguins."

"Perhaps also interested in space? Like black holes?"

"Yep. I hope the two of you become friends."

"Were you lonely when you moved?"

"I was. Until I started exploring with you, I really wanted to go back."

"And now?"

“Part of me still wants to, and part of me doesn’t.”

We watched the town go by through the train windows. We were moving away from home at incredible speeds. *Japan is really big*, I thought. My father and Uchida’s father both rode this train to get to work. The town around the station petered out, and I could see rice paddies and bamboo groves. The train stopped at two stations and then went into the tunnel under the mountains on the prefecture border. The tunnel was really long and dark. It amplified the noise of the train.

Uchida peered into the carrier, worried. “Aoyama, the penguin’s lying down.”

I looked, too. The penguin was curled up at the bottom of the carrier.

“Is it train sick?”

“What do we do, Aoyama?”

“Let’s get off at the next station. If you get carsick, you get better if you get out of the car and lie down awhile. Let’s give it some time and see if it’s all right.”

We got off at the next stop.

I’d never gotten off at this station before. The platform was elevated, and we could look down at a bus terminal surrounded by small buildings. Behind the bus terminal was a small shopping area and then houses. I could see cumulonimbus clouds forming. There was a green forest to the north of the platform. The forest’s green seemed to be tumbling toward the station. The train pulled away, and the station was empty.

We put the carrier down on the edge of the platform and monitored the penguin’s condition.

“I hope it’s okay,” Uchida said, worried. “It seemed so happy before.”

“Sorry. I don’t know what could have caused this.”

“It’s okay. This isn’t your fault, Aoyama. I’m the one who insisted we should bring it...”

Uchida’s voice got smaller and smaller. His eyes never left the penguin.

As he stared down at the carrier, his bangs were fluttering. The wind was blowing. *That’s weird*, I thought. There was no wind on the platform, and none of the trees north of the station were moving at all. Only Uchida’s bangs. I licked my finger and tried to confirm the wind’s direction. I moved my finger all around until I was sure the wind was coming from the carrier.

“Uchida.”

“What?”

“Back up a bit.”

When Uchida moved back, I made sure the station attendants weren't looking and opened the carrier. The penguin staggered out, looking very unhappy. The black of its back was all wrinkled. Its wings hung limp at its sides, like it was too tired to flap them. As though all it could manage was to stand upright and keep its balance.

The penguin's beak turned toward Uchida, and it squeaked.

A moment later, all the shiny down covering it stood on end, starting from its feet and rising toward its head. Like a tsunami lifting the feathers, a spiral running around its body. The penguin raised its beak so high, it made it seem like it was swallowing a fish, stretching its body toward the sky expectantly.

The wind resembled a tiny tornado.

I grabbed Uchida's head, shielding him from the gale.

The next thing I saw was a Coke can with wings flying through the air. The wings shrank like deflating balloons, vanishing completely by the time it landed on the platform. The wind was gone in an instant. The Coke can made a heavy clunk as it landed, echoing across the deserted platform. The penguin was nowhere to be seen.

I was stunned.

Uchida said nothing.

I walked over, picked up the Coke can, and investigated it. It was cold, as if it had just come out of a vending machine. Cold enough the drops of water on the outside moistened my fingertips.

Only then did I finally remember what had happened to the penguins on the truck, the first time they'd appeared in town.

I named this phenomenon the Penguin Evaporation.



I added the following line to my notes on the subject:

☐ Why do penguins evaporate when they ride trains?

Observation Station

My hair was an extremely accurate barometer. I could measure the day's humidity by how curly it got.

It was raining constantly, and my hair curled up in little loops. The water level in the town's streams rose, and the mountains on the prefecture border were always gray and indistinct. The sound of water dripping from the trees was a constant presence.

"This is gonna create a bottomless swamp in the forest," Uchida insisted. We were a wise exploration squad, so we delayed Project Amazon and resolved to focus on our Rainy Season study instead. We cut out the weather reports from the newspaper and pasted them into our notebooks, highlighting the high-pressure systems over the Sea of Okhotsk and the Ogasawara Islands. Such was our passion for research that my little sister copied us and turned the newspaper rainbow-colored with all the highlighters. "Look, look!" she said, all proud of herself. "You're a real artist," I said, and she was entirely satisfied.

Uchida was really depressed about the disappearance of his friendly penguin.

"Maybe that was never a penguin at all," he said. "If it was a real penguin, it wouldn't have suddenly vanished like that."

"Then what do you think it was?"

"I don't know. But he's gone now, and I'm sad."

"I think it's a real shame."

"Do you know why it vanished?"

"This is a very difficult matter to research. Even for me."

"If it's too hard for you, Aoyama, then it is very difficult indeed."

Even if the true nature of the penguins was a mystery, Uchida had been awfully close to that penguin, and having a living creature you were fond of suddenly vanish was quite a blow. But I couldn't think of any way to comfort him. Even worse, I had to keep it secret that the lady was making the penguins.

I didn't think it was good to keep important facts from friends.

The word *vexing* described these emotions exactly. But right at the

height of my vexation, I got a call from the lady.

"I'm gonna make some penguins soon. Wanna experiment?" she asked.

She's the biggest mystery of all, I thought.



On Sunday, I went to the church to meet up with the lady. The sky was covered in fluffy clouds, all gray and silver. But patches of blue peeped out from between them. The air still smelled like rain. As I walked down the bus route to Kamonohashi Park, a ray of sunshine made it through the clouds, brightening the town around me. I could see the bright patch moving. It was like someone up in the sky was examining our molecular structure with a laser beam.

The lady came out of the church smiling, clearly in a very good mood. I was always happy to see her in a good mood.

Her hair was shining like aluminum, and I was extremely jealous. I expressed admiration for how straight her hair was, and she ruffled mine, saying, "Yours is having a tantrum!" My hair curled up like this because my hair molecules were bonding. It was not my fault. But I did not argue the point.

"Where should we do this?" she said.

I thought we should definitely keep using the bus terminal for our experiments.

We walked down the bus route. The bus terminal was on the edge of our neighborhood. The closer we got, the fewer houses there were, until there were more vacant lots than houses.

While we walked, it started to rain again. The drops of rain were tiny, like mist. The soft patter of the drops falling filled the air. I pulled out a very modern folding umbrella from my rucksack. All I had to do was press a button, and it unfolded like NASA deploying the antennae on a space probe. The lady took out a large green umbrella, as round as her breasts.

Even with the umbrella, the raindrops were so light, they got under the umbrella, hitting my face and arms.

"It's like we're walking inside a can of Sprite," the lady said.

"The plants are happy."

"The whole forest is soaking wet. It's kinda nice."

"Feel like you can make penguins today?"

"I do. Totally feeling it. I'm itching to make some. Watch closely and discover the penguin-making mechanic."

"This is a much tougher mission than I anticipated."

"Do I hear you complaining, child of science?"

While we walked, I explained the Penguin Evaporation I had

observed. I also filled her in on the Penguin Energy problem. It was a secret that Uchida had kept a penguin, so I didn't mention that. The lady listened intently, but her only response was to whisper "Mysterious!" and swirl the umbrella around.



The rain-soaked bus terminal was empty. It felt even bigger today. The forest behind the terminal was foggy, like it was wrapped in cotton. The vending machines were wet from the rain, waiting for someone to buy a drink. Being a vending machine was such a sad job to have. I always felt sympathy for them.

We began our experiment.

The lady bought a can of Coke from the vending machine. I stood next to the machine, observing her actions. When I gave her the nod, she gave a little shout and threw the can. The red can spun through the rain. Then it fell to the asphalt with a clunk, unchanged. I ran over and picked up the can. It was dented, but not at all penguin-y.

We repeated this experiment three times with no penguins created.

"The experiment has failed."

"It really shouldn't have, though," the lady said.

"But the can hasn't changed."

"Weird," she said, spinning the green umbrella.

Then I saw the phenomenon begin.

This time, the phenomenon started on the surface of her umbrella. At first, I thought it was the drops of water on the umbrella surface. They were the same green as the umbrella. But the drops were moving oddly. Drop merging with drop, combining, the drops growing larger and larger. Then they swelled up like a blister and burst, and the fragments turned into pale-pink flower petals. As if the surface of the umbrella was producing them, drop after drop exploded. As the lady spun the umbrella, flowers of all colors raced across the surface, and between them, green stems stretched out in the air. It was like watching a time-lapse video of plants growing.

The rain on the bus terminal was soft as mist, so it was very quiet around us. To better observe the phenomenon, I walked around the lady as she spun her umbrella.

"What do you think?" she said, looking up at the umbrella.

"It's an extraordinary phenomenon," I said.

The plants were staking out their territory on the lady's umbrella. The long green stems formed spirals. I clearly saw a row of daisies running along its edge. Flowers buried her umbrella, like someone had splashed paint all over it, the growing stems tangling together as they

reached for the cloudy sky. Small yellow bulbs swelled up from the umbrella's rim, growing into bright mango-like fruit. At last, large sunflower blossoms bloomed at the end of the longest stems. When the lady shook the umbrella, the sunflowers waved, too. Vines were spilling over its edge, so the lady ran her fingers along them, grinning. The umbrella had become a tiny botanical garden.

"Wow," she said.

"Have you ever made plants before?"

"My first time!"

A beam of sunlight broke through the clouds like a searchlight, and the bus terminal we were experimenting in suddenly dazzled. Sunny but raining. Sunlight trickling through the flower petals, lighting up the lady's face, like she was standing in a beam of light shining through a sheet of cellophane.

A moment later, the second stage of the phenomenon began.

The plants that had grown so tall suddenly stopped moving and began to wither. Color faded from the petals, and the long stems turned brown. The sunflower blooms drooped, and seeds spilled out onto the asphalt. The mangoes dangling off the umbrella swelled up, sprouted wings, and turned into penguins.

"There they are!" she yelled.

Penguin after penguin was born. They waddled off toward the forest behind the bus terminal. The lady threw the Coke can again, and this time, it did transform into a penguin.

The lady's umbrella was kind of a mess. Like she'd had plants growing in a hanging basket and forgotten to water them. They were completely brown and looked dead.

"The experiment succeeded!" she said proudly. "I told you it would!"

"It did. And I have a new hypothesis."

"Oh! Nicely done."

"We will need some more experiments to confirm it."

"More?" she said, sighing. "You sure know how to work a girl."

We did a few more experiments, and I wrote several hypotheses in my notebook.



- ☐ When the lady is in a good mood, she wants to make penguins.
- ☐ The lady has 1. The power to make penguins, and 2. The power to make other things (bats, plants, etc.).
- ☐ When the sun is shining, power 1 is active, and when the sun is not shining, power 2 is active.

- When power 2 is active, even the lady has no idea what'll come out.
- When power 1 is active, the lady gets tired. (*Requires further experiments.)
- When power 2 is active, the lady feels better. (*Requires further experiments.)



I have no idea why, but my mother loved it when my sister and I wore galoshes, so when it was raining, we always wore them to school. My sister had convinced our mother to buy her red galoshes and was thoroughly satisfied. On rainy days, she could be a real devil. She always shook her umbrella to fling water everywhere and jumped into puddles. As her brother, it was my job to rein her in. But I understood the compulsion to jump into puddles when wearing galoshes. It made you feel like a real explorer.

Walking to school in the rain, I looked up, whispering, "Altostratus clouds." I couldn't exactly open my notebook in this weather, so I had to settle for reciting the names of each type of cloud I could remember. Cirrus, cirrocumulus, stratocumulus, nimbostratus. Clouds had different names depending on their shape and how high they were. I had memorized a lot of them.

I'd started to regularly play chess with Hamamoto during breaks at school. Uchida joined in.

When the three of us were gathered around the chessboard, Suzuki would try things every now and then. We considered that he wanted to play chess, too, and offered to let him join in, but he refused.

Suzuki spread out the map as if flaunting it at us, making plans for further exploration. Suzuki and his minions, including Kobayashi, were copying us, forming an exploration society.

"How far do you think we can go?" Kobayashi asked.

"I dunno—it's a big adventure," Suzuki said, tracing the route on the map like the party leader. When he saw Uchida and me looking, he got mad. "What? Don't look at us!"

Uchida and I had made that map in the first place, so we had every right to look at it. But I said nothing, merely turning back to my match with Hamamoto. If I didn't stay focused, there was no way I'd be able to play at her level. Suzuki went back to talking about his expedition plans.

Staring at the chessboard, Hamamoto said, "Did Suzuki's group make that map?"

"No!" Uchida said quietly. "It's ours."

"They swiped it?"

"We stand in opposition to the Suzuki Empire."

"What's the Suzuki Empire?"

"Suzuki and his minions. Unfortunately, we have failed to find a way to get along with them."

Hamamoto snorted like a grown-up. "No need to do that. It's impossible to get along with everyone."

She took her eyes off the board, staring into the distance. When she played chess, she was always so focused, it was like she was mechanical and didn't need to breathe, so it was rare to see her tune out like this.

"You okay, Hamamoto?"

"Aoyama, have you two explored the whole town?"

"Not all of it. Our map is still unfinished."

"The hill with the water tower?"

"We've been there," Uchida said. "We found a path that leads to the back of the athletic field."

"But that forest contains many mysteries," I said. "That's why we've named it the Jabberwock Woods. We intend to fully explore it sometime. Once the weather's better."

"But the ghost moon shows up there," Hamamoto whispered. "If you see it, you'll die."

Uchida looked nervous. "...So I've heard. Is that real?"

"I don't believe it," I said. "There's no evidence to support it. Do you believe it, Hamamoto?"

"Of course not," she said, lost in thought again.

I remembered when I was on a picnic with the lady in the grassy area near the back of the athletic field. I'd seen Hamamoto come out of the Jabberwock Woods and been quite surprised. I considered asking what she'd been doing there but decided not to.

I wished to respect her privacy.



Sunday night, I'd agreed to meet the lady for chess, so I went to Seaside Café.

I sat in the seat by the window waiting for the lady to arrive. I had my notebook open on the table and was analyzing the results of the bus terminal experiment. I drew a picture of the sunflower growing out of the lady's umbrella in my notebook. I needed to practice drawing more so I could record my observations with a greater degree of accuracy. Then I added an index to the notes. By creating an index, I could find out just how many things I'd learned.

After burying myself in research for a while, I took a breather, staring up at the blue whale hanging from the ceiling. There were no other customers that night. Music was playing softly. Outside the window, I could see the darkened dentist's office and the vacant lot next door. Every time I saw my face in the glass, I always thought I was looking more grown-up and felt satisfied, but then I'd look in the mirror the next day and not look older at all. This was a very strange phenomenon—and a very disappointing one.

Yamaguchi made me a smoothie.

"It happens sometimes," he said, sitting down across from me.

"What does?"

"You get stood up."

I wrote *stood up* in my notebook.

Yamaguchi scratched his bushy goatee. It looked like iron filings stuck to a magnet. I'd once been extremely focused on magnet research and still liked magnets better than anything else in the world. I don't think there's anything more wonderful and mysterious than magnets and iron filings together. I thought about the iron filings I had stored in the drawer of my desk back home.

"Wanna play chess with me?" Yamaguchi offered, so we played chess.

He was not good at chess and seemed more interested in scratching his beard than looking at the board. The match played out extremely slowly. I eventually started nodding off, and so did he. The game got even slower and eventually stopped progressing at all.

I heard the door open and thought the lady was there, but it was just my father. "I got a call from her," he said. "She's not feeling well so won't be able to make it."

It was a shame, but I hoped she felt better soon.

I said good night to Yamaguchi.

"*Bonne nuit*," he said sleepily.

My father and I walked through the neighborhood. The streetlights next to a vacant lot seemed like searchlights lighting the depths of the sea. I half expected strange-looking fish to come swimming out of the dark corners of the vacant lot. I'd borrowed a book Hamamoto recommended from the library and learned a lot about the deep sea.

"The deep sea is a world of the unknown," I told my father. "The water pressure is so high it flattens everything, and sunlight doesn't reach it. There are creatures down there that look like aliens."

"Maybe the deep sea is connected to outer space," my father said. "You know astronauts train in large water tanks, right?"

"I do."

I walked awhile in silence.

"I hope the lady feels better."

"...Getting stood up is always lonely. It's happened to me, too. You get this lost feeling inside, right?"

"I definitely feel a little lost."

"And nobody likes feeling lost."

"...Life is full of things you don't like but have to endure."

"You are absolutely right."

"Dad, what does *bonne nuit* mean?"

"Good night. It's French."

"What's so good about it?"

"In this case, it's used just like *good night* in Japanese."

I would have to write down *bonne nuit* in my notes. The next time I played chess with the lady, when it was time to go, I'd say good night in French and surprise her. If she said "What's that mean?" I'd be able to explain that it was the same as *good night*.



I have already mentioned buying sweets with my allowance to replenish my brain's energy.

All along, I've been buying different kinds of sweets and experimenting with how well my mind functions after eating them. I even tried eating sugar cubes directly. The results of my experiments indicate that the best nourishment for the mind is provided by the Boob Cakes sold at the nearby sweetshop. The actual name was some difficult foreign-language word, but when my sister first saw them, she'd shouted, "Boobs! Boobs!" so I called them Boob Cakes now. They were about ten centimeters in diameter, round, and unbelievably soft. There was cream inside. There were a number of nutrients beside sugar that help my brain function, and Boob Cakes had all of these. And they were far better tasting than sugar cubes. They were so soft, you had to wonder if anything this soft should be allowed to exist. Were actual breasts this soft? They were wonderful.

Uchida and I bought some Boob Cakes on the way home from school.

"We're not supposed to take detours," Uchida said. He was a little grumpy.

"But Boob Cakes are really good. You should try them."

"Is that the real name?"

"It's the name I gave them. So when you ask for them at the store, make sure you don't call them that. They won't understand."

"Aoyama, for someone so smart, you sure talk about that stuff a lot. It's weird."

"What's so weird about liking breasts?"

“Nothing, I guess... But it’s still weird.”

On the way home, we crossed a big street with a dry cleaners, a drugstore, and restaurants. If you turn onto that road and then onto the side street that leads to the water purification plant, you’ll get to the candy store.

If you open the heavy door and step in, you’ll find the air filled with sweet scents. There’s a table with a big pile of candy in little bags or wrapped in foil. In a big glass case are rows of little toylike cakes. There’s a small café attached, so it also smells like coffee. The air is so sweet, I feel like it makes everyone sleepy. Just being in the shop is really fun. It cheers me up so much, I feel like I don’t have to be afraid of anything. If I could make a second research laboratory here, my research would progress in leaps and bounds, and I’d get a lot of cavities.

As they were putting Boob Cakes in bags for Uchida and me, the door opened and Hamamoto came in. “Shopping?” she asked.

“Mm, yeah.”

She looked at the candy on the table. Didn’t look like she was buying anything. When Uchida and I started to leave, bags in hand, she stopped us.

“Aoyama, I have a question.”

“What?”

“You know a lot of things, right?”

“Yeah. I like to think I do.”

Hamamoto fixed her astonishingly large eyes on me and brushed back her chestnut hair. Her hair curled up in this weather, too. But it was still softer than mine. She smiled.

“Are you free right now, Aoyama?”

“I don’t know if I’m free. I am juggling several research projects, so I’m always very busy.”

“What are you researching?”

“That’s a secret. All I can say is that these projects are of the utmost importance. But if you’ve got a problem, I definitely have time to help solve it.”

Hamamoto glanced around the shop. Lowering her voice, she said, “You see, I’m actually researching something myself. And I was hoping to get input from the two of you.”

“Does the subject of this research start with a *P*?” Uchida asked, presumably thinking of the penguins. I thought the same.

But Hamamoto shook her head and said something I didn’t expect.

“I’m researching The Sea.”

When the rain stopped, the sunlight hammered down, making it so hot and muggy that my face felt sticky.

Uchida and I grumbled about the heat, but Hamamoto was almost skipping. She had a grace about her like a nobleman's daughter, and she reminded me of a girl robot that had just finished charging her battery. Astounding. The roads and roofs ahead of Hamamoto glittered in the sunlight. Beyond those rooftops, the sky was blue, and the water tower stood on a breast-shaped green hill. Hamamoto was leading us to that hill.

"Hamamoto, how far are we going?"

"You'll see."

I wondered what sort of sea Hamamoto was researching. Our town was quite far from the sea. Even if that new railroad was built, we'd still have to take a train to get there. But she made it sound like you could get to this sea on foot.

We passed the white apartment building where the lady from the dentist's office lived. Hamamoto pointed to the concrete stairs leading up the water-tower hill.

"Up there," she said.

"I know this place!" Uchida said. "I've been up there before."

"We've already explored this area. Are we almost there?"

"Not yet!" Hamamoto said. She kept walking.

She went all the way up the stairs, around the water-tower fence, and into the woods. The same path Uchida and I had explored in May, following the Penguin Highway. The athletic field fence was on the left, and the deep forest we'd named the Jabberwock Woods was on the right.

The rain had stopped, but from the sounds the forest made, you'd think it was still raining. The sunlight beamed down, creating little pools of light in the woods. If we walked much farther, we'd reach the field with the high-tension towers, but then Hamamoto said "There!" and pointed into the forest. There was what looked like an animal path branching off the trail we'd been walking on. It led deep into the woods.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"I've been down it lots of times," she said. "It's fine. We might get a little wet, though."

Hamamoto was very adventurous.

"Are you sure?" Uchida said nervously. "What if there's a bottomless swamp?"

When we were exploring, Uchida was always on guard against bottomless swamps. Apparently, they were found in forests sometimes and could easily prove fatal.

"They suck you in like a black hole. Put one foot inside, and you

can never come out.”

“Just imagining sinking into a swamp is unbearable.”

“You wouldn’t be able to breathe. You’d die, and no one would ever know.”

Uchida was very serious.

The noises of the town didn’t reach this far. The grass grew high on both sides of the path. There were trees as far as the eye could see. It was like we were in the deepest jungle. In the bright patches where the light made it through, we could see swarms of moths. The Jabberwock Woods was very deep. We weren’t sure just how far this forest went. But Hamamoto just kept walking. She even looked like she was having fun.

The path sloped slowly downward.

“It’s getting muddy,” Uchida fretted. Then he let out a little shriek and crouched down. A drop of water had fallen off a branch and moistened the back of his neck. A ray of sunshine hit him like a laser beam, and the drop of water gleamed. Like when there was a sunshower.

Suddenly, Hamamoto broke into a run. “Almost there!” she cried.

“Wait up!”

We hurried after her.

Tree branches brushed against us as we ran by. I felt a nervous tension in the pit of my stomach. A feeling that when we left the forest we’d be at the ends of the earth, by a small observation station. That station should be a building shaped like a large white eggshell, built in cooperation between NASA and the Japanese government. Only one researcher had been dispatched here, and he lived there all alone. Would he welcome our exploration party? Maybe he’d have tea and snacks.

I imagined he would.

Then I realized I’d left the forest behind, and there was nothing but blue sky above.



A clearing with grass, like a soft green carpet. Not a single tree growing in it.

Blinding light made the whole thing glow. I looked up and saw long, jagged silver clouds drifting past at high speed. Nimbostratus clouds form at four thousand meters; up there, the wind was blowing so fast, it could blow everything away, but down here in the clearing, everything was quiet. A strange feeling. Hamamoto didn’t slow down after leaving the forest; she was already halfway across the field. A stream running out of the Jabberwock Woods stretched across the

field like a snake. She reached the edge of it and turned back, waving at us.

Trees surrounded the clearing. A forgotten land in the heart of the Jabberwock Woods. Like a giant soup plate waiting to be filled with some sort of liquid. As I walked across it, it felt like the sky was a lid placed on top of us. As if the top of my head was being pulled up toward the sky.

Both Uchida and I looked tense.

We walked slower and slower and finally stopped.

Right in the middle of the grass, where Hamamoto was pointing, was a strange translucent sphere. Accounting for its distance from us, the sphere's diameter was approximately five meters. It was hovering about thirty centimeters above the ground. It didn't seem to be using any sort of engine to keep it suspended in the air. I could tell because it made no sound at all. This mysterious object was just reflecting the sunlight, glittering in silence.

Uchida tugged my sleeve. "What is it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe a new type of spacecraft developed by NASA?"

We tried to go closer, but Hamamoto stopped us.

"Better not get too close," she said grimly.

"Is it dangerous?"

"It moves sometimes. Spike-like protrusions extend out of it."

"So we can't prove it's safe yet." I knelt down and looked under it. "Still! What is it? This is a very strange object! How is it floating like that?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm researching it."

"You called it The Sea?" Uchida asked.

Hamamoto nodded proudly. "Yes. I named it."

The sphere did look like it was made of water. Each time a gust of wind blew across the grass, little waves ran across the sphere's surface. It was slowly spinning, reflecting the light. There was a faint white pattern across the surface, and parts of it were a navy blue. It was like looking at the Earth from outer space. But it was much more transparent than the Earth in those photos. Looking closely, I could make out the green of the forest on the other side of the rippling sphere.

I paced on the grass around it, making careful observations.

"Amazing, right?" Hamamoto said.

"It is extremely mysterious!" I took out my notebook to record my observations. It opened to a place a few pages back, where I'd written about the rumors in class. *A silver moon appears over the hill with the water tower*, it read.

Hamamoto peered over my shoulder. "Oh, those rumors. I started

them.”

“Why?”

“If there are rumors about the place, then no other children will interfere with my research,” she said with an impish grin.

This was completely astonishing to me.

“Aoyama, will you help me research it?”

“I am extremely busy... But this is fascinating.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“We’re really going to have to use our brains for this one. Hamamoto, would you like some cake?”

“You don’t mind?”

We sat down a safe distance away, observing The Sea while eating Boob Cake. Hamamoto agreed with me about the cake’s flavor. *Hamamoto doesn’t have any boobs, though*, I thought.

Feeling the nourishment spreading across my brain, I stared up at The Sea.

As I did, my brain started working very quickly.



We established an observation station on the boundary between the woods and the grass.

Joint research on The Sea would be a long-term endeavor. Some days it would rain, and some days it would be unbearably hot. Constructing a comfortable observation station would be extremely useful.

Uchida brought a folding chair and a beach parasol. Hamamoto brought a camping hammock. I brought binoculars and a tarp. We hung the hammock at the entrance to the forest so we could nap in the shade when we got tired from all this research. A short nap did wonders to restore the brain’s functions.

On the field near the forest was an orange penholder. Hamamoto had placed it there as a marker for fixed-point observations of The Sea. The location was some distance from The Sea, allowing for safe observation.

“This is a good place to make a base,” Hamamoto said. “If we get tired, the hammock is close by.”

Uchida set up the white parasol where the penholder was.

We set up the folding chair in the shade of the parasol. Sitting here made the grass field around us feel like the beach. The parasol was large enough that the three of us could fit under it with room for one more. I was sure that the shade provided by this parasol was among the best shade in all the world.

I always got anxious crossing the Jabberwock Woods to observe

The Sea. I'd wonder, *What if The Sea has vanished?* The possibility made me nervous, and sometimes I'd even break into a run when I saw the light of the clearing through the trees ahead. But there was no need to worry. Every time I came running out, The Sea was still there.

Rain or shine, The Sea would be hovering in the same place. On clear days, it would look blue, like a giant marble. On rainy days, it gave off a silver light that could be seen through the misty field. When the rain stopped and the evening sun hit it, the northern half of the sphere looked as if it had caught fire.

Monitoring The Sea through binoculars at the observation station, I took detailed notes.

"I can't read what's written in your notes," Hamamoto said.

"They're in shorthand. I can write faster than anyone."

"You use a red notebook."

"And you use a blue one. That's an extremely good notebook."

Hamamoto smiled down at the blue notebook in her hands.

Her notebook had been made overseas, and each page was much thicker than mine. Inside, the pages had thin blue lines. An aunt of hers had bought it for her while traveling abroad. Hamamoto's father was a college professor and had taught her how to take notes. She didn't write as many as I did, but she also took a great deal of notes, so naturally, she'd become extremely intelligent as well.

She wrote in her blue notebook in letters so perfect, they looked printed. She was recording all her research on The Sea in this blue notebook. Lists of the different phenomena that appeared on the surface of The Sea, a change log of the measurements of The Sea's diameter taken from the same fixed point. It was extremely excellent research.

According to her, the core observable activity The Sea took part in was expanding and contracting. She had decided to call periods where it was getting larger "waxing" and periods where it was getting smaller "waning." She used trigonometry to measure The Sea's diameter from a fixed point on the grass, made a chart of the results on graph paper, and pasted that into the blue notebook.

"I see. It's forming a gentle wave."

"It's waning right now. See? It's getting slowly smaller."

"It can get as large as three times the current size. That's astonishing!"

As it waxed, one day, a sudden Prominence occurred. This was Hamamoto's name for the phenomenon. I was, of course, aware that in astrophysics *prominence* referred to the phenomenon where portions of the sun's fire were flung up and away from the surface.

"What is a Prominence like?" Uchida asked.

"It fires a smaller version of The Sea like a cannon. You'll be very

surprised if you see one!”

She showed us a diagram she’d drawn in her notebook. A picture of what looked like a cannon sticking out of the sphere. A marble-size little version of The Sea spilled out of it. She’d drawn an arrow to it with a note that said *A small Sea comes out.*

“I’m the only one without a notebook,” Uchida said. “I do have one at school, though.”

“It’s fun having your own notebook. You can record everything you discover.”

“But unlike the two of you, I’m not researching anything.”

“You are, though!” I cried. “Black holes and the birth of the universe!”

“Do those count?”

“If it’s new information to you or new ideas you’ve had, then it always counts.”

Hamamoto looked at her notebook the way one looks at a treasure. “I think it’s good to write down whatever you find interesting.”

Uchida thought about it. “Maybe I’ll start carrying a notebook, too,” he said.



I was out for a haircut.

It was an extremely quiet Sunday. Tiny raindrops fell like mist, coating the town. The mountains on the prefectural border were melting into the gray sky. When I turned the corner at the dentist, I saw my father sitting in the window at Seaside Café, working. I slowed down for a moment, wondering if he’d see me, and he did actually look up. When I dipped my umbrella at him, he tapped on the window glass.

The shop that cut my hair was next door to the candy shop. The wall facing the street was entirely made of glass, and you could stand outside and see everyone getting their hair cut. I wasn’t sure why they’d designed it like that. I sat on a brown couch, waiting my turn, and when it arrived, I sat in front of a large mirror. This shop didn’t have any magazines worth reading, so I always took a half-read book along. While I was reading, the man who cuts my hair said, “The genius is here!”

To my surprise, the lady was there, too. She’d arrived before me and was already getting her hair cut. When I sat down on the chair next to her, she looked at me from the mirror world, and said, “Hello, kiddo.” Seen inside the mirror, the lady looked a little different.

Getting your hair cut right next to someone you knew was oddly

embarrassing. When he cut my hair, the man placed a sheet around my neck, and this made me look like a baby. No matter how serious my expression was, I just looked silly.

While he was cutting my hair, I inspected the lady's face in the mirror. She was gazing absently at a magazine in her hands. She looked a little pale, like she'd lost some weight.

"What you looking at, kiddo?" she asked, not glancing up from her magazine.

"Nothing."

"Again with the lies!" Then she said, "Sorry I couldn't show up the other day."

"I was stood up. So I did some research and played chess with Yamaguchi."

"Is Yamaguchi good at chess?"

"He can play chess in his sleep."

"He's a master!"

"I also fell asleep."

"Doesn't sound like much of a game."

After our haircuts were done, the lady said, "Aoyama, let me fix you lunch to make up for standing you up." I used the barbershop phone to call my house. My father answered and said I shouldn't impose. I let the lady take over. She was always very polite with him.

The lady and I walked through the rain with our umbrellas open.

In the rain, her face looked even more pale.

"You don't seem like yourself," I said.

"Yeah, I've been better. You feeling good?"

"I am in extremely good health. Reasons unclear."

"Reasons unclear!" she echoed, laughing.

The white apartment building where the lady lived was next to the hill with the water tower. I'd passed in front of it just the other day with Hamamoto and Uchida and had often looked up at it, thinking, *That's where the lady lives*. But this was my first time going inside. The Jabberwock Woods came right up against the back of the building, and I could hear the soft sound of the rain on the leaves.

I am the most collected and levelheaded child you'll find anywhere, but I messed up a bunch that day. I had trouble getting my galoshes off and almost knocked the flower vase off the shoebox. Then I slipped on the linoleum and almost fell over.

"Calm yourself, kiddo," the lady said.

The lady's apartment was a single large room. The building was on the side of the hill, so from the veranda you could see the whole town through the gray mist of the rain. Her room had a round wooden table, two chairs, a bed, a small bookshelf, and a round TV. There was a small pea-green single-seat couch facing the TV. She must sit on that

couch when she reads or watches TV.

While the lady was boiling spaghetti and making the sauce, I helped toss a salad in a white bowl. The lady showed me a very professional technique that involved first making the dressing in the bowl, then putting the veggies in and mixing it all up. Lettuce and yellow peppers all tumbled around the inside of the bowl.

I think I did a good job stirring it.



We sat at the round table and ate spaghetti and salad. I thought it was extremely good. With her hair cut, the lady's head seemed smaller. My head looked smaller, too. When the lady moved her head, her shorter hair swung in the light.

"I always feel a little anxious after getting my hair cut," she said.

"My hair is too prone to tantrums, so it's better to cut it. I feel much smarter now."

"Good lord. How much smarter do you need to be?"

"As smart as humanly possible."

To demonstrate how I was smarter today than I was yesterday, I explained the causes of the rainy season to the lady. She said, "Hmm. Still, I'm getting sick of all the rain."

She twirled the spaghetti around her fork, yawning.

"Are you sleepy?"

"I was really feeling out of it yesterday. Didn't even make it to church."

"If I don't go to school, I get scolded. Does that happen if you don't go to church?"

"Nothing like that, no. I go to church because I want to."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Good question." She cocked her head. "That's a mystery."

After lunch, she took out the chessboard from the top of the bookshelf. Her real chessboard was still at Seaside Café. The one in her apartment was an astonishingly small portable set. This one was only the size of a handkerchief, and the pieces were the size of peas. "You're getting way better, so I gotta practice," she said.

"I'm playing chess every day at school. Hamamoto is extremely good at it."

"Oh?"

"She even knows about the theory of relativity."

"Wow. Are you in love?"

"I am not in love with anyone."

"You sure about that?"

I sat on the floor with the lady, and we played chess. The lady

opened the sliding door to the veranda, so a warm, wet wind blew in, making the white lace curtains sway. The wind wasn't strong. The lady scowled at the chessboard intently at first, but she started nodding off soon. Eventually, I had to wake her up every time it was her turn. When we played chess at Seaside Café, I always got sleepy, but today it was her turn.

"You're very sleepy," I said.

"I'm not."

"You're lying."

"Am not!"

She rolled over, lying on her back. The feeble light from the cloudy sky played across her pale face. I knelt beside the chessboard, watching her expression. She opened her big eyes, trying to look up at me. She blinked several times. For a moment, she looked like she was my age, which was astonishing.

In a dreamy voice, she asked, "What time did you go to bed last night?"

"I always go to bed at nine."

"Right. You don't know what the middle of the night is like."

"Is it amazing?"

"It is. Everyone's asleep; the whole town's dark. It's an adventure."

"I'll have to do some training so I can be awake at night."

"No point in training for that. Being up at night is just lonely."

"I'll play chess with you until you get sleepy."

"That's enough out of you. Get your sleep, kiddo!"

From time to time, she closed her eyes. I was worried she was asleep, but her eyes always snapped back open like my sister's French doll.

"Did you make anything after our last experiment?"

"Nothing."

"I've got a hypothesis. I think you should try making things other than penguins. That might make you feel better. Like when you made the bats at Seaside Café."

"I don't wanna make anything but penguins."

"Why not?"

"I get bad dreams."

"Jabberwock dreams?"

"Close enough," she whispered. Then she turned her head and looked at the gray sky outside. "If I don't feel better, your penguin research can't progress, hmm?"

"I think you should go to sleep if you're sleepy," I said. "*Bonne nuit.*"

"It's still day!" she said, laughing. I guess she knew French.

Then she actually did fall asleep.



All I could hear was the rain falling outside the veranda and the sound of the lady's breathing.

Her eyes and lips were closed, and she was sound asleep. She didn't talk in her sleep like my sister did.

As I observed her face, I found myself wondering how her face came to be the shape it was, who decided these things. Of course, I knew that genes decided what our faces look like. But that wasn't what I really wanted to know. Why did I enjoy staring at her face this much? And how had genes managed to make the face I enjoyed watching so utterly perfect? That's what I wanted to know.

I tried writing about this mystery in my notebook, but I'd never written anything like this in my notes before, so I wasn't able to find the words for it. I ended up just writing *The lady's face, happiness, genes, perfection*. Then I wrote about the ingredients in the lady's spaghetti and how extremely delicious it was. Then I wrote how we'd made the salad like pros, starting with the dressing and then mixing in the veggies.

When I finished writing, the lady was still asleep.

It occurred to me that if she got chilly, she might catch a cold, so I got a towel from her bed and draped it over her. I believe this was the correct decision. *If she often sleeps on the floor like this, then she definitely needs somebody to come put a towel on her*, I thought.

Grown-up women didn't let grown-up men into their apartments often. And they'd never fall asleep in front of them. That only happened if they were a couple. But the lady let me in her apartment and fell asleep in front of me. This was because I was only a child.

There was something sad about the sight of someone asleep in the middle of the day. I felt sorry for the lady not being able to sleep at night. At night, I always get so sleepy I can't fight it off, and that often makes me sad. I often hoped NASA would invent a system that would extract this unbearable sleepiness from humans. If we had a Sleep Shift System, then the lady could use my sleepiness to fall asleep at night. And then I could stay up later doing research and would definitely become an important grown-up.

But while I was thinking about this, I must have nodded off.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the bed with a towel on me. The lady was sitting on the couch reading a magazine.

"You're up," she said.

"I think I should probably be getting home."

"Yeah... The rain's stopped, too."

When I stepped outside, I said good-bye and added, "Sorry the research isn't getting anywhere."

"No need to get all dejected about it," she said, grinning. "You're a child of science, right?"

"Even children of science get dejected sometimes."

"Don't try to rush it. Major discoveries take time."

I left the apartment building and found the sky above the hill was an unusual color. There were fluffy clouds covering the sky, and they were all painted a pale pink. I'd never seen the sky look like this before. There was a gap in the clouds beyond the mountains, and the light of sunset was shining through.

I turned back and saw the lady waving from her veranda.

She was pink, too.



The Sea was a problem that would flummox scientists the world over.

We had no idea what kept The Sea aloft. It appeared to be a large mass of blue water, but the surface of it remained constantly active. It got larger and smaller, like it was breathing. Sometimes several white swirls would appear on it, like miniature typhoons. Antenna-like structures would jut out of it sometimes. The more we observed it, the more it started to seem like a strange life-form.

The fact that in all the world, only the three of us were researching a project of such significance was a source of pride for me. I even had a dream that Uchida and Hamamoto and I would all get the Nobel Prize together. The three of us would line up together and let them place the medals around our necks. We would be put in science textbooks as the researchers who discovered The Sea. My father and mother would be extremely pleased. And the lady would say "Well done, kiddo."

We had to keep this research a secret. After all, if the existence of The Sea got out, a whole swarm of researchers would come here and take the research project away from us for the simple reason that we were only children. That's why we agreed to talk about The Sea as little as possible when we were at school. But keeping quiet when we had new ideas was extremely bothersome. There were times when we couldn't wait and talked about them during a break. Uchida suggested that The Sea was a device created by some laboratory somewhere, I proposed a number of hypotheses related to the phenomena displayed on The Sea's surface, and Hamamoto was thinking of ways to communicate with The Sea. We were all dedicated.

When Hamamoto and I were whispering to each other, Suzuki made fun of us, saying "They're in loooove!" The Suzuki Empire

always insisted it was love whenever any boys talked to any girls.

When we said nothing, Suzuki got louder. "Aoyama and Hamamoto are in love!"

Kobayashi let out a whoop, and Hamamoto's ears turned red.

"Aoyama, is the exploring going well?" Suzuki said with mock politeness. "You can't slack off just because you're in love with Hamamoto. We've explored much farther than you now. We've explored the whole river and drawn it on the map."

"It was a great adventure!" Kobayashi said, nodding gravely. "We almost died for real."

"We aren't slacking off. We've merely postponed operations until the rain stops."

"Getting frustrated??"

"I'm not frustrated. We're simply proceeding in a way that seems best to us."

"Hmph!" Suzuki snorted. "While you're doing nothing, we'll explore everything!"

When Suzuki finally went away, Hamamoto sighed. "He's so obnoxious," she muttered.

I guess he'd made her mad, because she said, "Let's go exploring! I'm coming, too."

"Why are you mad?"

"I'm not mad."

"Well, if you're not mad, that's good."

Hamamoto stared at me. When she did that, she always looked suddenly grown-up. I tried to imitate this, but it didn't go well.

"You don't care if Suzuki gets ahead of you?"

"Hamamoto, if Suzuki and us were like Scott and Amundsen and both trying to reach the South Pole, then we would have to hurry. But Suzuki's party has been headed downstream toward the ocean, while we have been headed upstream toward the source. Since we're going in opposite directions, there's no need to panic. And I am confident that any map Suzuki makes will not be very accurate."

"You really don't get frustrated."

"I don't believe in getting frustrated easily."

"Ugh. But what if they change direction?"

Uchida came over. "That would be bad!" he said.

"And I want to come, too," Hamamoto said.

Uchida wasn't sure about that. "But...this project is for Aoyama and me."

"Then The Sea is mine. Since the two of you joined later."

"Only because you asked us to, Hamamoto."

"Be fair," Hamamoto said, sulking.

"Hamamoto, exploring the river is dangerous. If you fell in, you

might drown. I can't really recommend it."

"I'll be careful not to fall in! Even if I do, I know how to swim," Hamamoto insisted.



That Sunday, my father had to go to the university.

There was a university in our town, and my father went there sometimes on Sundays. My father was a grown-up and had already graduated from college, but there were classes that people with jobs could take, too. According to my father, this university had just opened when we moved here, so all the buildings were brand-new, like a futuristic city.

After lunch, I was getting ready to go exploring, and my father was in the living room preparing to go to the university. He was flipping through a really thick book with lots of tags in it, writing in his notebook with a fountain pen.

"Going exploring today?" he asked.

"We are."

"Watch out for cars and don't go anywhere dangerous."

"Mm. I'll be careful."

My father drove to the university, so I had him drop me off at the mall. I'd agreed to meet the others there so we could go exploring.

It was an extremely hot day, as if midsummer had suddenly arrived. The sky above our neighborhood was blue like the pictures of Hawaii at the dentist's office, and the trees along the bus route were a deep green. As our car ran down the empty bus route, I felt like we were driving on a seaside highway. As we rounded the curve near Kamonohashi Park, I felt like at any moment the sparkling sea would appear. But I'd never actually been on a seaside highway, so this was just how I imagined it would be.

My father left me in the mall parking lot, and when I got to the food court where we'd agreed to meet, Hamamoto was sitting on a bench, looking like an impassive little robot. She had a large white hat on her knees. As though we were going on a picnic. When I said hello, she answered in a very cheerful voice.

Uchida arrived shortly after me.

First, we gathered at a table in the corner of the food court for a strategy meeting. I spread out the newly made map, and Hamamoto inspected it, making impressed noises.

"This blue line is the river we were exploring. This is the vacant lot behind the school, so that's where we started exploring."

"What's the 'ancient ruins'?"

"A reservoir. It feels like an ancient ruin, so we named it that. If

you keep following the river, it comes out in these rice paddies. If you go through the tunnel under the highway, it goes into a future residential area. That brings us to the area behind this mall."

"Beyond that is a mystery," Uchida said. "We're looking for the source."

"Is it not on real maps?"

"This river is not on regular maps."

"Does that happen?" Hamamoto said.

"Probably because this river is extremely small. I think the people who make those maps probably overlooked it. But that's exactly why our mission is so important. Nobody knows where this river comes from. If we investigate and uncover the source, I'm sure the people who make maps will be pleased to find out."

"Hmm," Hamamoto said. She looked serious.

We left the mall. We went around to the back of the building, and the empty future residential area spread out before us like the desert. Hamamoto put on her white hat. When she saw the concrete ditch, she looked a little disappointed.

"Oh. I was picturing a much bigger river, like the Amazon!"

"There was a part of it that was like the Amazon," Uchida said.

"It might be like the Amazon again farther up. You can never be too careful."

We peered through the green fence on both sides of the river and saw quite a lot of water flowing through the concrete basin. Probably because it had rained so much. The future residential area behind the mall was extremely large, full of telephone poles and lots marked out in even squares. The sun beating down on the asphalt was very hot, but Hamamoto's hat seemed to be keeping her comfortable.

"It smells like crayfish," Uchida said, peering into the river.

Hamamoto snuck up behind him, yelled "Boo!" and pushed his back. Uchida yelped, and she cackled. Then she walked away so smoothly, it was like she was on skates. Hands clasped behind her, she said, "It's all vacant lots!" Uchida shook his head. "I don't get her," he said.

As we followed the river, we talked about The Sea. Hamamoto insisted we had to explore the inside of The Sea.

"That sounds really dangerous," Uchida said.

"Of course, we can't go inside. We have to put something else in."

"Send in a probe?" I said.

"A probe!" Uchida said, delighted. "That sounds good. Like outer space."

We talked about that awhile longer, walking onward. I looked back, and the mall was very small. It wavered like a mirage on the far side of a real desert. A car climbing the ramp to the rooftop parking

lot gleamed in the light.

“Exploring rivers is not much fun,” Hamamoto said.

“Sometimes it’s fun, and sometimes it isn’t,” Uchida said. “Besides, you’re new at this.”

We passed behind a depot with a lot of city buses parked in it. There was a two-story office and a vending machine behind the fence, too.

The future residential area ended just past the bus depot, giving way to more rice paddies. The fence along the river stopped, and the concrete drain ran off between the paddies. By now, the rice had been planted, and there were even rows of green stalks in the water. Across the paddies to our right was the highway, with lots of large trucks and passenger cars zooming past.

The drain ran into a culvert behind an old brown building. We took a break in the shade of the trees there. Hamamoto drank some water from a canteen, and I spread out the map and drew the river’s path on it. Uchida went to investigate the brown building and came back excited. “This is the back of the library!” he said.

“If Suzuki sees us here, he’ll never shut up,” Hamamoto said, wiping the sweat off her brow.

“That would be unfortunate,” I said.

The laws of the Suzuki Empire held that boys and girls could not get along. Suzuki insisted that Hamamoto and I were in love and made fun of us for it. I thought this was very strange. First of all, this was hardly a matter worth wasting all that energy on. Didn’t he have anything better to do? Secondly, even if Suzuki were right, and Hamamoto and I were “in love,” that wasn’t a bad thing. Getting along was a good thing. I had no idea what the fuss was about. And third, Hamamoto and I were not in love. I already knew who I was going to marry. Even if Hamamoto was somehow in love with me, I would never be able to reciprocate. This was a shame.

Our break ended, and we continued following the river.

It ran alongside the highway for a while, between the rice paddies. A dark forest was drawing closer. There were high-tension towers on the other side of the forest. We stopped at the forest’s entrance. The drain kept going, into the woods. The shade here was cool, like we were underwater.

“Is this the Jabberwock Woods?” Hamamoto asked.

“That’s in the other direction.”

We applied bug spray and went in.

Different forests feel very different. *The Jabberwock Woods is the most forest-y forest in town*, I thought. A proper forest-y forest felt like the Amazon.

The forest we were going through was not like the Amazon. It was

all thickets. A place like this didn't make me feel like we were about to find ourselves at the ends of the earth. An Amazon-like forest was one that might lead to such a place. I considered trying to explain my idea of the ends of the earth to Hamamoto, but for some reason, I was reluctant to do so. She might just say it wasn't very scientific.

Perhaps because of the river, the forest was quite humid. We had to be very careful not to slip and fall into the river. There weren't any fences here.

As we walked through the forest, Hamamoto talked about her father. Her father was a college professor, and every day, he went to the college in town, taught students, and did research. He was studying the Earth. Her father had a very interesting job.

"My father's at the university today," she said. "There's a special class."

"My father's at the university, too," I said. "He's taking a class there."

"Oh? Well, maybe my father's teaching your father, Aoyama."

"That would be nice."

Just then, Uchida, in the lead, stopped in his tracks.

"What is it?" Hamamoto asked.

Uchida just silently pointed at the river ahead of us. The trees grew thick overhead, and the river was dark. We looked where Uchida was pointing, at the surface of the river, and saw a white patch on the surface where the water was swelling up. And this swollen patch was moving toward us very quickly.

Hamamoto grabbed my arm. "Aoyama, what is that?"

"I don't know."

"A fish?" Uchida asked.

As we stood on the bank watching, the white thing moved forward, pushing the water aside. It passed right in front of us. It was a huge fish, so big I would need both hands to hold it. It had a pale, slippery body. It was far bigger than anything living in a city stream should be. As the fish passed us, it jumped out of the water. Hamamoto and Uchida both screamed. Through the water spray, I saw shiny silver skin, like a wet eraser.

Even after the fish was gone, we stood rooted to the spot.

"What was that?" Hamamoto asked. "A fish? Ewww."

"This river has fish that big?" I whispered.

"It's like the Amazon," Uchida said.



At last, we got through the woods. Beyond it, the river once again had fences on both sides. We passed through a field of overgrown grass.

The heat hammered down, making it hard for us to breathe. There was an asphalt road next to the grass, and across that road was a row of buildings like a future city. We could see a lawn surrounded by a fence.

"Oh, this is the university," Hamamoto said. "Where my father works."

She stepped onto the lawn, walking across it.

"What about exploring the river?" I asked.

She had a tendency to forget that I was the expedition leader. This was very sad. Uchida and I left the river, too, following after her.

The university on a Sunday was empty and extremely quiet.

Her father's lab was in a building called the Earth Science Laboratories. Hamamoto said she'd come to visit several times, so she led us through the buildings with ease. The passages between the tall laboratory buildings were shady, and a hot wind whistled between them. "Are we allowed to be here?" Uchida asked anxiously. Hamamoto seemed sure that it was fine.

As we walked, we passed in front of a curved glass wall. Inside the glass were a lot of round tables, like the waiting area at an airport. Hamamoto called it the cafeteria. Then she stopped, peering in. I saw a man with an amazing beard sitting at a table in the corner, talking to my father. Sitting at the table talking to both of them was the lady from the dentist's office, which I found extremely surprising.

My father noticed us outside and stood up, looking surprised.

The man with the beard looked our way, too.

"That's my father," Hamamoto said.

"The one with the beard?"

"Yep."

"That's an amazing beard."

"He looks scary," Uchida said.

"My father's scary," Hamamoto said, apparently delighted. "Very scary."

We went into the cafeteria. It was nice and cool inside. We were all sweaty, so we had to stop by the bathrooms and wash our faces.

"I'm surprised," my father said. "Were you planning on exploring the university today?"

"Not at all. Our arrival here is a coincidence," I said. I looked at the lady. "What brings you here?"

"Studying," she said, puffing out her chest.

Hamamoto's father was a professor here, and today he'd held an extension course. My father had seen a pamphlet at the neighborhood association, and the lady had been invited by the professor himself—he was a patient at the dentist's office. After the lecture, the lady had come over to say a few words, and my father had joined them. While

they talked, they'd decided to get some tea at the cafeteria. And then we'd arrived.

We all gathered around the table drinking soft drinks like we were on a picnic.

Hamamoto's father was researching the atmosphere. He was a big bear of a man and didn't talk a lot. He had large eyes that stuck out, and it always looked like he was glaring at something. He had a blue notebook, too, sitting on the cafeteria table next to him. Whenever he explained things, he always curled his big body up and drew things in his notebook. He explained the topic of the day's lecture in terms we could understand. It was about an experiment to measure the composition of the atmosphere by floating a small balloon high up in the sky. He answered all my questions in great detail.

I took out my notebook and took notes on this, and Professor Hamamoto ask if he could see my notes. His notebook was filled with complicated formulas and graphs, and I thought it was just wonderful. If I could learn to make notes like this, I'm sure it would be really fun. I showed the professor some notes I'd taken on black holes.

"These are very well written. You're interested in outer space, Aoyama?"

"Extremely interested."

"That's great. I've got some good books at home I can lend you."

"You like space, too?"

"I do. I don't know that I could talk to anyone who wasn't interested in outer space."

"I'm not interested in outer space," the lady said, laughing. "I guess I can't talk to you anymore."

"You take extremely good care of my teeth. So even if you're not interested in outer space, I can overlook it."

The lady seemed in much better health than the last time I'd seen her. Color had returned to her cheeks, and she didn't look sleepy. She'd been smiling the whole time. Seeing her talk to my father and Professor Hamamoto made me realize she was a real grown-up after all. That made me feel a little sad. Strange.

"Professor, Aoyama is engaged in several different research projects. He's very busy," the lady said. "You're studying me, too, right?"

I was surprised to hear her say that.

"You're studying her?" the professor asked.

"She's an extremely interesting individual," I said cautiously.

"I can see that. She's certainly full of mysteries," the professor nodded.

"Aoyama and I are engaged in a joint research project," Hamamoto said proudly.

“So I’ve heard,” the professor said, looking very sad. “And you won’t tell me what it is you’re researching.”

“Is that why you’re slacking off on researching me?” the lady said. “What is it you’re studying?”

“It’s a secret. We will publish the results once our research has concluded.”

Professor Hamamoto’s eyes locked onto me. “That’s good,” he said. “Secrecy is important. You don’t want to accidentally blab about really important research.”

We decided to call off the day’s exploration there.

It was getting late, and Hamamoto seemed pretty tired. My father agreed to give us and the lady a ride in his car. The lady took the passenger seat, and the three of us sat in the back. Hamamoto’s father still had research to do, so he saw us off in the parking lot. He was squinting into the sunlight, which made him look like a surprised bear that had just wandered out of the forest. Hamamoto waved at him from the car window, and he waved back, his face still wrinkled up.

“Your father really likes doing research?” I asked.

“He really does. That’s why he gets so many cavities. He always eats sweets when he’s researching.”

“Is that why he comes by our office so often?”

“All true researchers suffer from cavities,” I said.

“You need to brush your teeth properly,” my father said. He was right.

“I always forget. Because I’m so busy.”

“You’re definitely busy. But there are busy people who don’t brush their teeth and busy people who do brush their teeth. Which do you think is smarter?”

“If you put it like that, definitely the ones who do brush their teeth.”

“Aoyama, you’re exactly like your father,” the lady said. “Both your passion for research and the way you talk.”

“When I was a kid, I was neither as logical as him nor as interested in research.”

As we passed the library and turned onto the bus route toward our neighborhood, I witnessed a mysterious phenomenon. Hamamoto was the first to notice. She poked me in the ribs and hissed, “The sky! The sky!”

There was a cloud in the sky over the water-tower hill. The center of this cloud was swollen and hanging down. The lower end of this protrusion was narrow and spiral-shaped. I’d never seen a cloud like that before. Uchida leaned over and looked up and said, “That’s weird.”

“Isn’t that over the Jabberwock Woods?” Hamamoto said,

frowning.



I can read lots of books, take notes with my hand in my pocket, and build a space station out of LEGOs. Acquiring such useful skills will make me a great grown-up.

Swimming was another thing I was good at.

When I first started elementary school, I was the kind of kid who avoided putting his face in water. I found the need to hold your breath in the water extremely restrictive. I thought it was very strange that we couldn't breathe in the water even though water was the origin of all life. But we had to use the pool at school, so I had my father teach me, and I learned to swim. Now I can swim like a dolphin.

In July, our school started swim lessons. We all changed into swimsuits and gathered at the pool. The sky was extremely blue, with only a few fluffy clouds.

Before we could get in the pool, we had to form two rows and pass under some big showers. Uchida and I stood at the very back of the line. Uchida didn't like the pool and looked ready to cry. Suzuki's gang was ahead of us, and they turned back, yelling, "Uchida and Aoyama are scaaaared!"

"I'm not scared," Uchida said, his voice shaking. "I'm just really nervous. That's different from scared."

"That's certainly the case. When I hear thunder, my stomach aches. But that's not scared. My heart is just beating faster, and I start to sweat, and my stomach hurts."

"Exactly."

I stretched to see, and the front of the line was already under the shower. The noise of the water hammering down was getting closer. I could hear the shrieks and laughter of my classmates as the water hit them. I saw Hamamoto glance back at us, her hair all stuffed up under her swim cap. She grinned, then strode boldly forward, vanishing behind the wall on the far side of the shower. She was like a tiny foreign automobile going through the car wash. The shower spray filled my vision. I could smell chlorine. The water was extremely cold. Uchida was clutching his head, so I pulled him through the shower. I yelped, and Uchida squeaked.

We did our warm-up exercises and then got in the pool. The water felt cold at first, but as we got used to it, it started feeling good. The first half was lessons, but during the second half, we could play as we liked.

Uchida sat on the side of the pool, dangling his feet in the water. I called out to him as I swam past, but he just waved and said, "I'm

good.” The teacher was wearing flip-flops and a shirt over her swimsuit. She came and sat next to Uchida, chatting with him.

I slowly lowered my head into the water, keeping my eyes just at the water line. I imagined what it must have felt like billions of years ago when the first brave life-form stepped onto land. Maybe the first creature on land thought, *It's hard to breathe up here. I should go back to the water.* The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to sink to the bottom of the pool. I ducked all the way under, letting a trail of bubbles out of my mouth, and looked around the pool depths.

When I was fully underwater, all the sounds faded and I was wrapped in a strange silence. Meanwhile, the bubbles I created were quite loud. I could see the bodies of my classmates all around. There were other kids underwater, their eyes squeezed tightly shut. I could see Uchida's feet dangling in the water where he sat on the side. Looking up from the bottom of the pool, I saw that the surface was glowing, the light swaying. If I took a deep breath, I could stay down there for a very long time. The key lay in controlling the volume and speed with which you breathed out.

One day, the lady and I would go to that seaside town, and I might be told to go swim in the ocean. I was glad that I'd learned to swim. I'd never swum in the ocean, so I wasn't sure exactly how salty the water was. I was really looking forward to going there with her.

Through the bubbles, I saw Hamamoto drifting by.

She was balled up, floating near the surface like a buoy. With her swimsuit, she looked like a dolphin. Dolphins can talk to one another with sound waves. She had her eyes shut and seemed to be listening to the sounds of the water world.

She's doing the same thing I am, I thought.

Then Hamamoto's eyes snapped open. Her big eyes looked straight down at me. I puffed up my cheeks, sitting still. She gave a little wave, and a few bubbles escaped her lips. She might have said something, but in the water, I couldn't tell what. I wasn't a dolphin.

Then I saw suspicious movement from Kobayashi and Nagasaki, two minions in the Suzuki Empire.

They were creeping over toward the side of the pool, where Uchida's feet were. Uchida was clearly in trouble, so I moved over behind Kobayashi and Nagasaki. I was planning on surprising them by pulling their suits.

But I was too focused on them and let my guard down.

Someone grabbed my suit from behind. They yanked on it so hard, I was shocked into swallowing some water. I hastily grabbed the side of the pool. I got my head above water and took a breath, but the person pulling my suit didn't let go. The string had come undone, and it was coming off. This was an extremely unfortunate position. The

two minions noticed and came over, grabbing onto my suit as well. My suit was all the way down to my feet now. My nether regions felt suddenly very cold.

I turned around and found Suzuki spinning my suit around above his head, retreating toward the far side of the pool.

The teacher blew her whistle. "Everyone out!"

Everyone climbed out, dripping wet, bodies gleaming like dolphins on the side of the pool. I alone remained in the water. Suzuki and his minions climbed out, too, laughing and watching me.

"Aoyama, what's up?" the teacher asked.

I rested my arms on the side of the pool, wondering why Suzuki had stolen my suit. Had they wanted mine for some reason? But they had their own, and given that mine was entirely ordinary, there was nothing to be gained by taking it. He didn't want my suit; he wanted to put me in this predicament. I didn't think it was nice to steal someone's swimsuit for one's own enjoyment. The more trouble I was in, the more he enjoyed it. Therefore, the less bothered I acted, the less he would enjoy it. If I didn't act at all upset, he wouldn't find it much fun and wouldn't try something like this again.

Based on this logic, I chose to pretend there was no problem.

I climbed right out of the pool, and the teacher yelled, "Aoyama, where's your suit?"

The girls all squealed and the guys gaped. "Aoyama, wait! Stop right there!" the teacher said, trying to give me her shirt. I stood up proudly like I'd just stepped out of the bath, walking along the edge of the pool. Suzuki and his group tried to hide behind the other kids, but everyone opened the way for me. Hamamoto was standing there, saying, "Oh my!" She saw Suzuki trying to hide and grabbed his arm, pushing him toward me. I stopped in front of him.

"Where's my suit?"

"Dunno!" he said.

"Where's my suit?"

"Dunno!"

"Where's my suit?"

Suzuki shoved me away, yelling "I said, I dunno!" and then ran away. I chased after him. Eventually, he yelled, "Bottom of the pool!"

The teacher wrapped her shirt around me.

Everyone else searched the pool and eventually found my suit.



That evening was quiet and lonely. At night, our neighborhood got as quiet as the bottom of the sea, but only some nights felt lonely. I attempted to research what divided lonely nights from not lonely

nights, but I never discovered an underlying principle.

I was lining up LEGOs on the living room table and putting them together. My sister was asleep on the couch. My mother was drinking tea. "What are you making?" she asked. "A probe," I answered. Hamamoto's father's story about measuring the atmosphere had given me a hint, and I was in the planning stages for an experiment to send a probe into The Sea's interior. This required constructing a sturdy device.

While I worked, I told her about what had happened in the pool. My mother listened in silence. She never looked flustered the way the teacher had, or worried. She just watched me, her eyes slightly bleary, like they always were. I thought my mother might scold me. When I was younger and had not yet made up my mind to be a great adult, she had often scolded me, like other ordinary children.

"Suzuki is definitely a mean one," she said. "I wonder why."

"So do I. I'm at a loss."

"You've been researching it?"

"Quite a lot. But Suzuki is the emperor of the Suzuki Empire, so it is difficult to get along with him."

"Because he's an emperor."

"Exactly."

"But...would you want to be friends with him if you could?"

"I think that would be best, if it was possible. If Suzuki said we should be friends, I am prepared to do just that."

"Then that's fine. Makes sense to me."

My mother ate some chocolate. My father had brought it back as a souvenir the other day. It had some peppermint pasted between two thin layers of chocolate. My parents wouldn't let my sister have any, saying that this chocolate was for grown-ups. But she would let me eat a little when my sister was asleep. I was extremely pleased by this.

As she ate the chocolate, she giggled like a little girl.

"I'll bet everyone was surprised when you hopped out of the pool naked."

"The teacher certainly was. She wrapped her shirt around me. Some of the other kids were surprised, but others just laughed."

"Be careful not to surprise people too much."

"There was no other way. If I'd stayed in the water, I would have gotten cold, and Suzuki would have enjoyed seeing me in trouble."

"That's right. But was there really no other way?"

"Can you think of one?"

My mother considered.

"I can't think of anything," she said. "You're better at this than I am."

If she said so, maybe I could have thought of a better approach to

the problem. Talking with my mother always made me feel that way.

My sister started snoring. It was almost nine. My mother took a sip of tea, glancing up at the clock. "Your father will be late tonight. Maybe after midnight."

"I'm sleepy. I don't think I can wait up for him."

"You don't have to."

"He leaves early and comes back late."

"It's really best if everyone gets a good night's sleep."

"I wish I didn't have to sleep."

I knew my father got on the city bus every morning at the Block 5 stop. The bus took about fifteen minutes to get to the station. Then he took the train across the prefectural line to work. My father always left very early and was liable to come back at all hours. Sometimes, like tonight, he'd be so late I couldn't stay up. In the winter, he left while it was still dark out and got back after it was dark again. He always had to wait at the dark bus stop with his briefcase.

When we knew my father would be back very late, I couldn't wait up for him. I was someone who always fell asleep as soon as I got in bed, but in that moment before I fell asleep, I always wondered where my father was. Maybe he was on the bus, watching the lights of the neighborhood pass by. Maybe he was right outside our house. Maybe he had just gotten off at the bus stop and was walking toward our house. Thinking that always came as a great relief to me. And then I'd fall asleep.

"Dad says when he's waiting for a bus, walking through town, or riding the train, he does a lot of thinking. Says he gets a lot of good ideas that way."

"He does?"

"And he gets a lot of good ideas at Seaside Café."

"Did you know that place isn't actually called Seaside Café? I had no idea."

"That's right. The lady gave it that name."

As I explained the origins of the name to my mother, the sleepiness got overwhelming.

Then the phone rang. My mother answered. "It's the lady," she said, handing it to me.

"Hello, kiddo," she said. She seemed to be doing well.

"Hello."

"You sound sleepy. Oh, right, it's your bedtime."

"I am extremely sleepy today. My brain is tired."

"The other day, you said I should make things other than penguins, right? Your hypothesis. That maybe doing that would make me feel better."

"The Aoyama Hypothesis."

“Well, the Aoyama Hypothesis might just be right. I feel much better.”

“What did you make?”

She giggled.

“...A blue whale.”

I probably should have been much more surprised, but I was just too sleepy at the time. I was about ready to drop the phone. So I just stood there, phone in hand, saying nothing.

“Wow, you are sleepy,” she said.

“I am sleepy,” I said.

“Brush your teeth, kiddo,” she said. “*Bonne nuit.*”



There was a blue whale in my dreams that night.

I insisted it was a bad idea, but the lady made a blue whale in my house. “It’ll be a baby, so it’s okay,” she said. But it was not okay. The baby blue whale filled the living room and couldn’t move. It looked extremely sad. I was worried it had crushed the lady. I searched for her as best I could, but she was nowhere to be found. And while I was in a panic, the baby blue whale made an amazing poop.

I couldn’t believe it. What a scary dream.



After school the next day, we went through the Jabberwock Woods to the clearing.

A warm, wet wind was blowing across the grass, and cumulonimbus clouds were piling up in the sky. I spent a while walking around the grass alone. I had something extremely important to think about, so I must have looked like a Greek philosopher. Moving away from Uchida and Hamamoto, I felt like I really was standing at the ends of the earth.

I looked back, and Hamamoto was kneeling down on the grass. She was tying a kite string to the probe I’d made of LEGOs.

Uchida was under the parasol writing in a notebook. Like Hamamoto and me, he’d started taking notes. He wrote in a different way than I did. He spent most of his time thinking hard with the notebook lying next to him. Eventually, an idea would come to him, and he’d write a few words down. And he never let us see what he wrote. So I didn’t know what kind of notes he was taking.

The Sea floating over the grass had swollen up quite a lot, and the current diameter set a new record, the largest recorded since we

established the observation station. And it was still expanding. A number of different phenomena had appeared on the surface of it. We'd given the different phenomena names: Triangle, or Hula-Hoop, or Mobius. But giving them names and taking notes on them did not clear up the mysteries of why these phenomena occurred or what they were for.

Walking around The Sea, I was thinking of nothing but the blue whale. What the lady had told me on the phone the night before. Even if the lady had made a blue whale, was there anywhere in town capable of hiding it? The penguins could hide in the woods. But you couldn't have a blue whale just wandering around in the forest. They were huge. The more I thought, the less it made sense.

"Aoyama!" I heard Hamamoto yell. "We're ready!"

I stopped mulling things over and joined her. Uchida came running over, too. Hamamoto had the probe dangling from the kite string and was swinging it back and forth. The probe was about the size of a softball. There was a thermometer inside, and the tip of a penlight jutted out of it, set up to flash at us. We'd also attached a small red flag so we could get an idea what forces were at work within The Sea. I'd tried to make it like the space shuttle, but as I was improving the sturdiness of it, it had grown short and stout, exactly like a penguin.

"Not the best-looking thing I've made."

"That's not true. It's a probe!" Uchida said. "It's amazing. Like a real experiment."

Hamamoto seemed pleased with it, too. "This is a real experiment."

"Aoyama, I think we should give the probe a name," Uchida suggested.

"Right... It looks like a penguin, so let's call it the Penguin I."

"Cute!"

The probe was officially christened the Penguin I.

But once it came time to launch the probe, we all fell silent. The Sea was just hovering there without a sound, all swollen up. There were several white ringlike things floating on the surface of it, spinning and moving around it. We'd named this phenomenon Hula-Hoop.

"I'm not scared," Uchida said. "But what if putting a probe in it makes The Sea mad? I'm not scared, but..."

"Will it get mad?" Hamamoto seemed worried, too.

"We've still not determined if The Sea is a living thing or not," I said. "But if The Sea is alive, then having a probe suddenly inserted in its body will definitely make it angry."

"Let's stay as far away as we can!" Hamamoto said.

We walked across the grass away from The Sea. Hamamoto unrolled a lot of the kite string. I took the Penguin I in hand, measuring our distance from The Sea. We were about fifteen meters away. Uchida held the end of the kite string, and Hamamoto peered through the binoculars. "Ready, Aoyama," she said.

I swung my arm back and threw the Penguin I.

The Penguin I flew through the air, landing on the northern surface of The Sea. It easily slipped inside, as if inhaled. From the point of impact, ripples ran across the surface of The Sea, making it wobble like Jell-O. We could see the penlight moving inside. "Contact successful," I said.

"I knew it wasn't water," Hamamoto said. "More like gelatin. All wobbly."

Suddenly, the kite string snapped taunt. Uchida yelped and started trying to unwind it, but he couldn't keep up. Trying to keep hold of the end of the string just led to him being dragged toward The Sea.

"Aoyama! Help! I'm in trouble!"

I grabbed onto Uchida. Hamamoto let go of the binoculars and grabbed Uchida, too. We put our combined weight into it, but it was like playing tug-of-war against our entire class. All three of us were dragged across the grass on our behinds.

"Eep!" Uchida screeched. He let go of the kite string.

A second later, the kite string was swallowed up inside The Sea. The flash of the penlight inside disappeared.

Hamamoto stood up and peered through the binoculars.

"Penguin I's disappearance observed," I said.

"Did The Sea get angry?" Uchida said, flinching.

Hamamoto lowered the binoculars and whispered, "Prominence!"

As we observed it, the phenomenon occurred.

The surface of The Sea moved violently. White-and-navy patterns flowed past. On what would be the southern hemisphere if this was the Earth, what looked like bluish-white walls rose up. If you were in space and a really huge tsunami happened on Earth, it might look like this. The walls moved slowly to the north, and as they did, they joined forces, forming large lines. If they really were the waves of a tsunami that could be seen from space, then they were really big ones. Big enough to swallow up Japan and China and Russia.

Cautiously, we moved closer to The Sea. Other than the strange phenomenon on its surface, everything else about it was the same as ever. The Sea reflected the sunlight, shining on our faces like we were standing near water.

"It's moving slowly."

"This is a Prominence?" Uchida said.

Hamamoto shook her head. "Not yet. This is the preliminary

phenomenon.”

As the tsunami-like constructs on The Sea’s surface reached the northern hemisphere, they all joined up, forming a single straight line. That line slowly started to bend, as if trying to wrap around something. Finally, the two ends of the tsunami joined up, forming a large ring. The tsunami rose to greater heights, the circle jutting out like a smokestack. The outside of the circle was generating a lot of airy white stuff, like when you’re whisking whipping cream. Inside the circle, it was totally different, a dark navy blue like a gouge running all the way to the deep sea. The changes happened slowly but precisely, as if the movements were calculated; it was impossible to get bored watching it.

Hamamoto suddenly grabbed our hands.

“Come on, we need to move back!”

“Why?”

“The Prominence is starting!”

We did as she said and ran away.

When we reached the observation station, we turned back and saw the circle on The Sea’s surface reaching toward the sky like a bluish see-through tube. Shortly after, the entire surface of The Sea seemed to pulse. The echo of it ran across the entire clearing. The tip of the tube swelled up like a trumpet and fired a small sphere. This new sphere traced an arc through the sky above the clearing, flying off into the forest.

This was the phenomenon Hamamoto had named Prominence. The Sea bore children this way. Hamamoto had seen one of these tiny Seas drifting through the Jabberwock Woods.



A lukewarm wind blew, making the Jabberwock Woods rustle. The air smelled like rain, and my hair was curled up tight. The sky was heavy with storm clouds, the bottoms of which looked like they’d been dipped in ink. Like if you ate them, you’d get sick. A flash of lightning ran across the clouds, and for a brief moment, their insides lit up. I saw what looked like blue fireworks burst across the sky. A few moments later, there was a low rumble.

My stomach started to hurt, and I had trouble staying calm.

“Thunder!”

“That cloud just lit up!” Uchida said, pointing at the storm cloud. It was like a giant peering down at us.

“Aoyama, are you scared of thunder?” Hamamoto asked.

“I’m not scared of it. If I hear thunder at home, I’m comparatively calm. But we’re in a grass field with nothing around us, so the chances

of lightning striking here are quite high.”

There was another rumble. I flinched.

“Is that cloud coming this way?”

“If you hear thunder, you shouldn’t go near tall trees, big trees, train tracks, cars, or iron towers. You also shouldn’t be out in the open like this. And you shouldn’t have anything metal on you.”

I folded up the umbrella and ran off toward the Jabberwock Woods. Once I was in the woods, I felt safer, but Uchida said, “Where’s Hamamoto?”

I looked back at the clearing from inside the woods, and she was still standing in the clearing. She was an extremely logical person yet did not seem aware of the dangers of lightning. “Hamamoto, it’s dangerous!” I yelled. “Come on! Hurry!”

A strong wind raced across the clearing like a wave in the grass. Hamamoto put a hand on her hair, staring at something across the field. The clouds were like soft-serve ice cream with ink swirled in, and they were getting closer.

“There are penguins here!” she shouted.

Somehow, there was a group of penguins over by The Sea. Their beaks all pointed at the gray sky, swaying rhythmically. Maybe the electricity in the atmosphere was charging the Penguin Energy. They surrounded The Sea, at a set distance from it. Like space pilots around the mothership. I wondered why it had never before occurred to me that the penguins and The Sea might be connected.

“You’ll be struck by lightning!” Hamamoto yelled, addressing the penguins.

“Hamamoto, you really should get in the forest!” I yelled. Then I saw something moving out of the corner of my eye. On the stream that meandered out of the Jabberwock forest and across the clearing. A silver thing was moving along the surface of the water, kicking up foam.

Hamamoto had seen it, too.

When the silver thing in the river got near The Sea, it jumped high above the surface of the water. It was extremely small, only about the size of a dog, but I could tell it was a blue whale. And when the whale made a big splash, the penguins waddling around The Sea scattered in all directions, squeaking.

Once it had chased the penguins away, the blue whale dived to the bottom of the stream.

“Hamamoto! Lightning!” I yelled, clinging to a tree.

At last, she turned and ran into the woods. She was out of breath and nearly ran right into me. A moment later, there was a huge crash of thunder, and I ducked my head. Hamamoto laughed, not seeming to mind.

“You saw that, Aoyama?” she said. “There was a weird fish in the river!”

“I saw it. An extremely big fish.”

“That was weird!” she said, looking back out at the clearing.



I added the following phrases to my notes:

☐ The penguins are afraid of the blue whalelike creature the lady made.

☐ There seems to be a significant connection between the penguins and The Sea.

The Forest Depths

I often write down plans in my notebook to methodically work through later.

Plans for exploring with Uchida. Plans for books to read at the library. Plans to construct a space station out of LEGOs. Plans for practicing chess. Plans to go to the seaside town with the lady.

The notebook's grid allowed me to make nice-looking time schedules. Dividing big plans into several little plans. Dividing the big blocks of time into smaller ones. Time worked like LEGOs. It all neatly fit together into one big plan to turn myself into an important grown-up.

I didn't hate school, but it offered no way to determine my own schedule. If I could plan out the time allotment for school at will, that would be extremely fun.

As summer vacation approached, I made a number of plans in my notebook. I divided up the time, making a number of different bricks, and fitting them together. All so I could accomplish as many fun things as possible.



On the last day of school, we all went to the gym, listened to a speech from the principal, and then helped clean everything. I helped wipe the windows so clean, you couldn't even tell they had glass in them. While I was furiously cleaning, Hamamoto came by carrying a broom.

"Aoyama, are you going to the summer festival tomorrow?" she asked.

"I believe the chances of me going are quite high," I replied.

Suzuki came over spinning a rag around his finger. "L-O-V-E!" he said.

The emperor of the Suzuki Empire was always watching.

Without thinking, I started to argue, but before I could, Hamamoto spun around.

“Yes, we’re in love. You got a problem with that?” she yelled. The entire class got very quiet. Nobody had ever responded like this before, and Suzuki’s eyes got really wide. He stood there for a minute but couldn’t think of anything to say, so he finally left the room, muttering, “They’re in love...”

Hamamoto turned back to me. “That wasn’t true,” she said. “He was just getting obnoxious.”

I was impressed.

On the way home, Uchida asked, “Are you really in love?”

“No.”

“Then why did Hamamoto say you were?”

“If we insist we’re not in love, Suzuki will just keep making fun of us. So she said we were in love, and now Suzuki can’t say anything else. It was all part of her cunning plan.”

“Oh. I thought the two of you were actually in love. I was so surprised!”

“We are not in love.”

Uchida thought about this for a while. “But thinking about it, if you tell a lie like that, won’t Suzuki just be even angrier later?”

“Why?”

“Because Suzuki’s in love with Hamamoto.”

I stopped in my tracks, surprised. “That doesn’t make sense. He’s done nothing but be mean to her this whole time. If he was actually in love with her, it isn’t logical to do things she wouldn’t like.”

“I don’t get it, either. But he’s definitely in love with her.”

“How are you so sure?”

“I’ve been observing him. But I think everyone else knows. They’re just too scared of Suzuki to say anything.”

I was impressed by Uchida’s observation skills. Weirdly enough, this knowledge gave me a happy sort of ticklish feeling. I even felt like maybe I could be friends with Suzuki soon.

“Oh. So Suzuki’s in love with Hamamoto. I had no idea. If he felt that way, he should have just told me.”

“Suzuki would never do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s embarrassed.”

“Why would Suzuki be embarrassed about being in love with Hamamoto? Falling in love with people is totally normal. My mother and father got married because they fell in love. If my father didn’t fall in love with my mother, I’d never have been born.”

“That’s true,” Uchida said, laughing. “But you just don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

As we passed the dentist’s office, a warm wind was blowing across the vacant lot next door. The cumulonimbus in the sky looked like the

soft-serve ice cream you eat at the pool. The cicadas on the row of trees were quite loud. The end of the asphalt road we were following was wavering like it was covered in hot water.

Only when Uchida and I split up did it really sink in that summer vacation was starting tomorrow. “Uchida! Tomorrow is summer vacation. What do you make of this delightful fact?”

“It makes me very happy.”

“Me too! There’s so much we can do! I have all sorts of plans.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to the summer festival?”

“I am.”

“So am I. And so is Hamamoto. Going to the summer festival really makes it feel like summer vacation has started. I think that’s what it means when people say you can feel it in your bones.”



The summer festivals in our town were held by the different neighborhood associations. They’d hang red paper lanterns around the park clearing, and people from the neighborhoods would pitch tents and open stalls. When we first moved in, the summer festival was really small, not very summerlike at all. But as the vacant lots filled in, more people joined the festival, and it became quite bustling.

That Saturday morning, the festival hadn’t started yet, but my sister wanted to put her yukata on already and wouldn’t stop bugging my mother about it. “Wait just a little longer,” she kept saying. My sister got really sulky and blew raspberries at her.

“You’re so selfish,” I said.

“Mind your own business.”

She’d learned this phrase somewhere recently and was using it at the slightest opportunity. I was getting extremely sick of it.

After lunch, we started hearing noise from the park, so my father and I went to take a look.

They were putting up a stage for the traditional Bon Festival dance in the soccer field and hanging paper lanterns from the electric lines. My father was talking to Yoshida, the head of the neighborhood association, and Yamaguchi from Seaside Café. Yamaguchi had closed up shop and had been helping with the festival preparations all day. My father started helping put tents up, so I went back home and started organizing my research. Then I took a nap so I wouldn’t get sleepy too early that evening.

When the sun started going down, I went to the festival with my mother and sister.

Walking through the neighborhood, we could hear children’s

voices everywhere. Lots of people were strolling in the same direction we were. The summer festival was the only time you ever heard people's voices late into the night. My sister had finally been allowed to put her yukata on and was quite pleased with it. Trotting along in her outfit, she looked like a silly little goldfish. She met some kids from her class on the way, and they were laughing together.

The park at night was like another world entirely. It was shaped like a hexagon and all lit up; lights glowed from stalls like the one where my father and a few neighbors were cooking yakisoba, and lanterns were hanging all over the dance stage. Like a pool of light at the bottom of the night.

I went around the different stalls with my mother. We watched my father make yakisoba for a while. We tried to catch some goldfish. Some neighbors taught my sister how to do the festival dance, so she was dancing a lot.

Some girls from my class passed by. They were all in yukata. Hamamoto was with them. She said, "Look! Yukata!" and spun around. "How's it look?"

"Not silly," I said. My honest opinion, but Hamamoto seemed miffed. "It looks great," my mother said, and Hamamoto smiled happily. Then she went to dance with the other children.

"Was that Hamamoto?" my mother asked.

"Yes. She knows about the theory of relativity."

"She's so cute! Like a little doll."

You meet all kinds of people at festivals.

While I was watching the Bon Festival dance with my mother, the lady came pushing through the crowd. She was with the dentist and the receptionist. My mother said "Good evening," and they bowed their heads and said "Good evening," too. She'd been helping out at the raffle stall earlier but said they were taking turns enjoying the festival.

"You like festivals, too, Aoyama?" she asked, giggling. "Are you researching them?"

"I'm taking a break from that tonight."

"I see. Taking breaks sometimes is important. You aren't getting sleepy?"

"Not today," I said.

For a while, we stood and watched my sister dance.

"You aren't dancing, kiddo?" the lady asked.

"I don't dance."

"Why not?"

"If I dance, it looks like a robot dancing. I think I approach it too logically."

"Well, you are a child of science," the dentist said very seriously.

Everyone else laughed.

"See you around," the lady said. They moved on.



At last, I found Uchida. He was walking around with his mother and father. I ran over and said, "Good evening." Uchida's father was very thin, and his mother not so thin.

Uchida and I decided to look around the festival together.

We ate some shaved ice in a corner of the park, under the light of the red paper lanterns. The shaved ice was as cold as Antarctica, and my brain froze.

Uchida kept looking warily around.

"Is Suzuki here?"

"I'm sure he is."

"I really don't want to run into him."

"I also don't want to run into him and get into a fight. But he has no right to curtail our freedom. We are free to come to this festival and to go out exploring."

Hamamoto, my sister, and the other girls were still dancing. They all loved dancing. Hamamoto waved at us while she danced. I waved back.

"Aaaaoooyaaamaaa!" a voice said behind me.

As it did, someone grabbed my pants and pulled them up. My lower half was squeezed uncomfortably, forcing me onto my toes like a ballerina. Suzuki's minions, Kobayashi and Nagasaki, were on either side of me with a firm grip on my pants.

Suzuki came up in front of me. His face illuminated by the lantern, he was holding a bunch of cotton candy, sticky from drool, like a weapon. It glittered in the lights.

"Don't you move, Uchida," Suzuki said, pointing the cotton candy at him. Even without the threat, Uchida was too surprised to move a muscle. I was stuck on my tiptoes and couldn't move, either. Suzuki took a bite of the cotton candy, grumbling insults.

I took a bite of shaved ice.

"Stop eating that!" he yelled.

"Why? I have the right to eat as much shaved ice as I like."

"You piss me off! Always talking crap!"

"I know why you're so angry, Suzuki."

"What?"

"If you're in love with Hamamoto, you should really just tell her. I had no idea! And I feel I should apologize. Hamamoto and I are not in love. So if you're in love with Hamamoto, I really think it would be best if you tell her how you feel soon. And stop being mean to her

instead.”

“Th-th-th-th-th...,” Suzuki stuttered. “That’s not true! Don’t make things up!”

“I don’t think you should be embarrassed about being in love.”

“I’m not!”

Suzuki had turned bright red. I have no idea why he was so angry. He spit in my shaved ice. It was a shame to ruin that much shaved ice. Since I couldn’t eat the shaved ice anymore, I grabbed Kobayashi’s T-shirt and dumped it down the inside.

Kobayashi shrieked.

I had successfully freed myself from Kobayashi, but Nagasaki had both hands on my pants like a sumo wrestler wrangling their opponent’s loincloth. Nagasaki was very strong, so I couldn’t free myself. While I was trying, Suzuki stuck his sticky cotton candy in my hair.

“Stop that, Suzuki—my hair will be a fright!”

“You little,” he said, grinding the cotton candy against me.

“Suzuki, stop!” Uchida yelled.

While we tussled, the lady’s voice came. “Yo there, rug rats. What’s all this?”

Suzuki and his gang went super-quiet. The lady from the dentist’s office was their greatest weakness.

“Kiddo, you appear to have something sticking out of your hair,” the lady said, looking it over.

“It’s cotton candy.”

“You’re supposed to eat cotton candy. You shouldn’t play with your food.”

“Suzuki ground it into my hair.”

“Ah! Don’t tattle!” Suzuki said.

“I will if I want!” I said.

The lady’s eyes narrowed, and she gave Suzuki a terrifying look. “If you keep doing stuff like this, I might just pull all your teeth out. With no anesthetic.”

“That would be extremely painful. There would be a lot of blood,” I said.

Suzuki turned white as a sheet.

The lady put her hand on her hip. “Now, then,” she said. “Suzuki, you’re a good boy, so you’re gonna apologize to Aoyama, right?”

Suzuki looked at the lady, then at me, and back at the lady. His mouth twisted sideways. Like he wasn’t giving in. “Why should I?” he said. “I don’t have anything to apologize for.”

“Oh, look at the big strong boy. Even though you cried like a baby at the dentist’s office.” The lady laughed.

“I didn’t cry!” Suzuki yelled. “You’re a liar!”

“Why do you hate me so much?” I asked.

“I hate you because I hate you!”

“He can be a bit cocky sometimes,” the lady said, taking Suzuki’s side. He looked quite pleased by this.

“Yeah! He’s cocky! Always saying weird stuff I don’t understand. And lying!”

“Oh, Suzuki, you’ve got a bug on your back,” the lady said, stepping around behind him. Then she put him in a half nelson.

“What? Where?” Suzuki screamed. “Grown-ups aren’t supposed to lie!”

“Grown-ups lie all the time,” the lady said. “Come on, kiddo! Eye for an eye! Sticky hair for sticky hair!”

I rubbed my head on Suzuki’s face. “Stop!” he yelled, struggling. But the lady held him still. Suzuki was a little pudgy, so his cheek was all wobbly. My hair was all sticky from the cotton candy and Suzuki’s drool, so naturally, Suzuki’s cheek was now all sticky because of the same two things. It glittered in the light.

Finally, the lady let him go. “Now that Suzuki’s all sticky, too, that’s enough for today.”

“It’s not fair!” Suzuki said, rubbing his cheek. “You always take Aoyama’s side. Even though you’re a grown-up!”

“Who said grown-ups don’t take sides?”

“Ugh, you’re so mean!”

The lady snorted, puffing up her chest. Her breasts shook. “If you’re so mad, then you’d better try to get me back. But you can’t, because you’re just a kid!”



After Suzuki’s group ran away, Uchida and I went with the lady to the water fountain in the corner of the park. I tried washing my hair in it, but a little water wasn’t going to be enough to get my hair back to normal. Suzuki’s drool and the cotton candy had hardened my hair. It was like a shape-memory alloy.

“Maybe that was a little rough,” the lady said.

“I thought it was a bit childish of you.”

“Look who’s talking!”

“But you really saved us,” Uchida said. “Thank you. I...I couldn’t do anything.”

“I’d really prefer not to interfere in children’s fights, but... Oh well,” the lady said. Then she pointed at my hair. “Kiddo, your hair is a mess.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Do you know why Suzuki’s always coming after you?”

"Because I'm much smarter than him?"

The lady smiled at Uchida.

"Do you know, Uchida?"

He nodded. "I do. At least I think so."

"Earlier, Suzuki was getting in the way of Hamamoto's festival dance. She was really mad."

"Suzuki is often mean to Hamamoto."

"Does Suzuki like Hamamoto?"

"How did you know that?" I asked, surprised. "I didn't know till Uchida told me."

"He's mean because he's interested in her. And you're always talking to her, so that pisses him off."

"Hmm."

"You still have a lot to learn."

"I am forced to admit it."

"Forced, are you?" The lady laughed under the lantern lights.

After that, we went around the festival again. The music playing on the speakers set up on the stage, the noise of the raffle drums, the laughter of children and grown-ups, all rose up and vanished into the night sky. The world seemed so different from how the park usually was at night that it struck me as very strange. The lady really seemed to like the summer festival. She was a grown-up, but she got really into the goldfish catching and then ate a bunch of cotton candy.

When we got to the yakisoba booth, my father had left the griddle. He was enjoying a beer with Yamaguchi from Seaside Café. When he saw us, he stood up and bowed his head to the lady.

"You sell out of yakisoba?" she asked.

"Sorry! It was unexpectedly popular."

"I'm too late, then!"

My father looked at my head, puzzled. "What happened to you? Your hair's all...fancy."

"Mm. There was an accident that led to the application of cotton candy and Suzuki's drool."

"What a tragedy."

"I got over it."

Uchida found his parents, and they went home. My father was helping to clean up the stall, so I went home with my mother and sister.

As we left the park, Hamamoto came running over.

"Aoyama, you're leaving already?"

"Yep."

"Your hair looks weird."

"Yes. There was an accident."

"Don't forget about our research on The Sea."

“Of course not.”

We left the park. The lady was going the other direction, so we split up there. The lady bowed her head and walked off alone. Toward the white apartment building by the water-tower hill.

I walked with my mother and sister for a while, then turned around.

I couldn't see the lady anymore. Just the lights of the festival, all lit up like a merry-go-round at an amusement park.



I have already told you about how I make plans in my notebook and carry them out later.

With the start of summer vacation, I became very busy. Normally, I am the busiest child in the entire city, but when summer starts, I make a plan for the entire day and become even busier. I may very well be the busiest child in the entire world.

I started waking up earlier in the morning. Sometimes I even got up at five. When I wake up that early, even my father isn't up yet. I can listen closely, and there won't be a sound in the entire house. My room and the hall are blue like the shoals of a sea from the Cambrian period. When I open the window and look out at the early morning neighborhood, chilly air comes rushing in, clearing my mind. I get a lot of research done in the morning.

In exchange for waking up so early, I take midday naps. When we were out observing The Sea, I'd sleep under the parasol. When I was at home, I'd lie down on the floor in the living room with my mother and sister, put a towel over my belly, and sleep there. If I didn't take a nap, by evening I'd get so sleepy and useless that I couldn't move any more than my sister's teddy bear could.

On really hot days, we would play with LEGOs or games at my house or Uchida's and discuss outer space. Sometimes we went to the library. Uchida and I both went to Hamamoto's house, and Hamamoto's father let us read some of his books on space. Hamamoto lived in the same apartment building as Uchida, so it was easy to get there. They had a small planetarium you could look at in the house, and Hamamoto's mother gave us some really lovely sweets. I think summer vacation is an extremely good invention.

While we were researching The Sea, we played chess under the parasol or with a ball Uchida brought. We also laid cards out on the grass and played massive games of Concentration. Hamamoto flipped a bunch of different cards over and then wailed “I can't concentrate!” and flopped over on the ground beneath the parasol. Sometimes we spent the entire day in that clearing, but we never once saw anyone

else come through the Jabberwock Woods. This was a secret clearing hidden deep in the woods.

Sitting in that clearing felt like we were in outer space, so I talked about outer space a lot.

Uchida and I were fascinated by wormholes. Wormholes were passages that connected our universe to another. Some people thought that black holes were actually wormholes. Uchida was extremely interested in the idea that black holes weren't dead ends but actually led to another universe.

"Even if you get sucked into a black hole, maybe you can get sucked through it and end up in another universe," Uchida insisted. "If the gravitational force along the way doesn't crush you."

"So what's it like on the other side?" Hamamoto asked.

"It's the opposite of a black hole, so it would be a white hole."

Hamamoto often played with LEGOs while she talked. She'd brought some blue bricks in her bag, and she made a sturdy wall with them. She didn't make space stations like I did. She just made walls, and she only used blue LEGOs. But she seemed to have so much fun doing this that watching her made me think it might really be fun.

"Do you only make walls, Hamamoto?" I asked.

"I dunno, I just like them." When she ran out of LEGOs, she broke the wall she'd made up and started again. "I wish I had a lot more bricks. I think it would be fun to make a really big wall."

"Maybe it would be fun," I said.

"You're weird, Hamamoto," Uchida said.

"Am I?" she asked.

Uchida wasn't sure how to respond.

"...Maybe not weird enough to call weird," he said, at last.

Hamamoto hugged the LEGOs to her chest, chuckling.

I imagined a whole lot of long blue walls all lined up across the grass. And Hamamoto standing on a ladder, piling up one blue block after another. The blue plastic wall shining in the sunlight. The Sea floating silently behind all these blue walls. I thought that would be extremely beautiful.



It was a beautiful clear morning, with a warm breeze blowing. Cumulonimbus were piling up on the other side of the mountains.

I spent the morning out of the heat in my room, researching the Suzuki Empire.

After organizing all my previous notes, I wrote a list of all the kids in class, drawing circles around each group. I ended up with a bunch of different circles, like drops of water on tiles. The smallest circle of

all was Uchida and me. I could also add Hamamoto to that circle.

Drawing it all out like this showed me that the Suzuki Empire was definitely not very big. Kobayashi and Nagasaki were the only ones always with Suzuki. The Empire's actual numbers were no different from our group, if we included Hamamoto. The only reason Suzuki could act like the king of the class is because the other little groups would do what he said. It was a strange hierarchy. Extremely interesting.

After eating lunch, I got my rucksack ready. I was on my way to research The Sea. As I was putting my shoes on at the door, my sister asked, "Where are you going?" "To do an experiment," I said.

"I wanna come, too! Can I come?"

"No."

"Why not? Why not?!"

"Well, it's an extremely difficult experiment. You wouldn't understand."

"I would so! I understand things!"

"What's three plus five plus eight?"

"Um, uh..."

While my sister thought about that, I put on my hat and ran out of the house. I could hear her wailing behind me and felt a little sorry for her, but our experiments were a secret, and I had no choice.

I met Hamamoto and Uchida on the water-tower hill, and we cut through the Jabberwock Woods. The breeze was hot, and the trees were swaying, making the light dance.

Our plan was to send another probe into The Sea. On the grass under the parasol, I began construction on Penguin II. Hamamoto was wearing a big white hat, and she walked off alone across the grass toward the stream. Uchida sat on the chair under the parasol, glaring at his notes like a philosopher. The warm breeze was making the corners of the pages flutter.

"What are you writing in your notes, Uchida?"

"Hmm...", Uchida said, clutching his head. "I'm not good at explaining things."

"Really? I think you're good at it."

"But these are my own thoughts."

"It's harder to explain things you think up yourself?"

"If I struggle to explain something and then you just say 'Oh, that's easy,' then I'd be sad. Maybe it's all boring."

"I'd never say it was boring."

"I know you wouldn't say that, but... It's just embarrassing."

"Embarrassing things are tough to handle."

"Very."

"Is this like how Suzuki is in love with Hamamoto but won't admit

it?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Then I won't ask again. Professor Hamamoto himself said that really important research shouldn't be shared with just anyone. That we should keep it secret."

Uchida focused on his notes, and I focused on building Penguin II.

When I finally finished the probe and looked up, I saw Hamamoto moving closer to The Sea on her own. "Hamamoto, careful!" I said. She raised a hand and waggled her fingers. I looked through the binoculars, and there was a construction floating on the surface of The Sea like a big blue vein, moving like blood was circulating through it. I'd never seen a construction like that before. Hamamoto clasped her hands behind her, walking cautiously all around The Sea. Then her head tilted sideways.

Suddenly, she started waving frantically. "Get over here! Quick!" she yelled.

"What is it?"

I jumped up and ran across the grass.

When I drew up next to her, she said nothing, just pointed at the thing moving around The Sea's circumference. Hidden on the curved surface of The Sea, I could see a boy and girl standing with their backs to us. The girl was wearing a big hat just like Hamamoto's. The boy was wearing shorts just like mine.

"Who are they? Where'd they come from?" I whispered.

"I dunno," Hamamoto said.

"I couldn't see them from the parasol."

"It was just a girl at first, but now there's a boy, too."

Hamamoto frowned, worried. No other children had ever appeared in this secret clearing before. And these children just seemed to be hiding in the shadow of The Sea, not trying to talk to us at all. Hamamoto and I moved slowly around The Sea. But the strange children did the same thing, and we couldn't seem to catch them.

"Hey! Who are you?" I called.

"Aoyama!" said a voice. Hamamoto and I turned around and saw Uchida standing there, looking baffled. "You see something?"

We turned back toward The Sea to tell Uchida about the strange children, but there were three of them now.

"There's more!" I yelled. "There's two boys now!"

Hamamoto's eyes narrowed. She looked them over carefully. "Are they us?" she said.

"Is that even possible?"

I waved an arm. One of the boys on the other side waved, too.

"Hamamoto, can you turn around?"

She did, and the girl on the other side turned to face us. The girl

looked exactly like Hamamoto. Hamamoto's double looked right at my face and said, "I can see them from here!" The Hamamoto next to me said the same thing at the same time. This was an extremely perplexing situation.

When we turned around, the three children hiding on the other side of The Sea did the same, peering into the shadow of The Sea's curve.

"What's going on?" Uchida said. "There's a lot of us!"



We went back to the parasol and analyzed the strange phenomenon we'd just observed.

I drew a circle representing The Sea in my notebook and us standing next to it. Then I drew arrows wrapping around The Sea. "We could see our backs because the light went all the way around The Sea and reached our eyes. Maybe light is bending around The Sea."

"Like a black hole?" Uchida said. "But then why aren't we sucked into it?"

"The light is bending, but the gravity itself isn't strong."

"That doesn't make sense," Hamamoto said. "If light doesn't go straight, then wouldn't The Sea look much weirder when we observe it from here?"

I had to mull over that one. Hamamoto definitely had a point.

"That must mean that when we're standing there, only certain light circles the outside of The Sea."

"Is that even possible?"

"I don't know. But when you walked around The Sea, I saw new activity occurring on the surface of it. Weird blue veinlike things rising up. Maybe that construct has something to do with the light bending."

"Maybe it's just making fun of us," Uchida said anxiously. "I mean, we were really surprised."

"Payback for throwing a probe into it?" Hamamoto whispered.

We sat together under the parasol, watching The Sea. It was extremely large right now. But the veinlike construct was no longer there.

"What should we do? Should we hold off on throwing the new probe in there?"

I held up the Penguin II probe I'd built. Uchida and Hamamoto thought about it.

Uchida looked up, turning toward the stream.

"The light's weird again," he said. "I can see someone over by the

river.”

I looked up. There were three children standing by the stream that ran through the clearing.

“This is different,” Hamamoto said.

“Uchida... Isn’t that Suzuki’s group?”

“Chaaaaarge!” Suzuki’s yell echoed across the clearing. Sweat dripping off their faces, his minions shouted, too, and all three came running toward our base.

Nagasaki was the biggest and the fastest. He reached our base first.

“Eek!” Uchida yelped, running. Hamamoto was shoved aside.

Both Kobayashi and Nagasaki tackled me, so I lost my balance and fell on my behind. A moment later, Kobayashi threw himself on top of me. I tried to shove him off, but Nagasaki jumped on top of him. Kobayashi chuckled and let drool fall on me. I said, “Ew.” They were extremely heavy, and I was extremely hot. This was a tough battle.

At last, the Suzuki Empire’s emperor caught up with them. He took a seat on top of Kobayashi and Nagasaki, like this was his throne. It was even heavier, and I could barely breathe. “You’re heavy!” I said.

Suzuki said, “Are we? Are we?” wriggling around. I groaned, and so did his minions. Suzuki was the only one enjoying this. That’s what emperors did. Suzuki leaned over Kobayashi and Nagasaki, looking at my face. He looked proud of himself. His sweat dripped down onto me.

“I win! Say you lose!”

“I...won’t!” I said. “Because...I haven’t...lost yet!”

“You really don’t know when to quit!”

“I...never...quit!”

Hamamoto stood up and tried to push Suzuki off. Suzuki glared at her. “Don’t you move. I’ll stomp on Aoyama’s face!”

“Why would you do something so stupid?” Hamamoto seemed less angry than disgusted. “You’re an idiot.”

“Shut up. If Aoyama admits he’s lost, I’ll let him go.”

“Aoyama, just say you’ve lost,” Hamamoto said frostily. “This is a waste of time.”

“I...refuse!”

“Aoyama, don’t be stubborn. They’re crushing you.”

Suzuki yelled, “We’re crushing you!” and started rocking again. “You gonna beg the lady to save you again? It’s not fair having her save you! Promise you’ll never tattle again!”

“I...will...not!”

“You’re a snitch!”

“I am!”

This seemed to surprise Suzuki. He fell silent for a bit, then gulped. "You shouldn't be a snitch!" He looked pretty serious. "Snitching is bad!"

"How...did...you...find us?"

"We were exploring the river," Suzuki said, waving the exploration map. "Unlike you, we made a lot of progress during summer vacation. Today it took us through this dangerous forest."

"That...same river? From...behind...the school?"

"Yeah. We followed it all this way."

The stream flowing through this clearing was the same as the drain going through the vacant lot behind the school. I was a little bit frustrated that Suzuki had figured that out before us. But only a little bit.

"Prominence!" Hamamoto yelled.

"What?" Suzuki said, looking up.

Lying on top of me, Kobayashi also turned his head and saw The Sea for the first time. A number of different trumpetlike constructs were jutting out of its surface. Prominence was starting. "What is that?" Kobayashi grunted. "It's moving! That's...creepy!"

"It's dangerous. Gas comes out of the surface of it."

"What? Gas? Will you die if you inhale it?" Kobayashi asked.

"You will," Hamamoto said.

"That sounds really bad," Nagasaki said.

On top of the pile, Suzuki didn't budge. "That's just another lie. You'll be fine! I'm not scared."

Then a squeaking noise came from all around us.

"What's that noise?" Suzuki asked.

I forced my head back and saw the lady, upside down, at the south entrance to the clearing. She wore a big straw hat and was leading a gang of penguins behind her like she was their boss. There was a huge wave of penguins coming out from between the trees around her.

"Go, penguins! Get Suzuki!" the lady yelled.

Suzuki gasped.

The squeaking sound got louder as they approached. Kobayashi flinched and tried to stand, and Suzuki lost his balance and fell off. I was finally able to breathe properly again, so I was extremely relieved. "What the heck?" Suzuki said, angry. Both Kobayashi and Nagasaki were mad at him now. "You're heavy!" they said. "Oh? You're gonna disobey me now?" Suzuki yelled.

As the Suzuki Empire was on the brink of a civil war, the charging penguins hit us.

There were about ten in all. They knocked the parasol down and flipped the chair, stomping around us, flippers flapping. I almost got

stepped on by one, and Suzuki and his minions got flipper slapped on their thighs. "Ow!" they yelped. Naturally, the penguins were quite strong. They could use those flippers to swim through the ocean like a space rocket.

When the penguin army passed, Suzuki was gone. Kobayashi and Nagasaki were standing there, stunned.

"Suzuki already ran for it," I said without getting up.

"What the...? Arghh...!"

They looked at the group of penguins, then over at us. They clicked their tongues and ran off toward the Jabberwock Woods. The lady was standing at the border between the woods and the clearing, and as they ran by, she yelled, "The woods are dangerous! There are more penguins in there!"

She came walking over and helped me to my feet. Then she lifted the brim of her straw hat and took a long look across the clearing at The Sea.

"I see. That's what you're researching, hmm?"

"Yes."

"You have found something very strange. So...what exactly is it?"

"We don't know."

The lady smiled at Hamamoto, but Hamamoto didn't smile back. She was glaring at the lady from under her white hat.

"Where's Uchida?"

"Over there," the lady said, pointing to the west side of the clearing.

Uchida came out of the forest and started walking toward us.

"Uchida! Prominence!" Hamamoto shouted, pointing at The Sea.

Small versions of The Sea were being fired out of the large trumpet-shaped constructs. One passed directly over our heads, flying off toward the forest. Another one went rolling across the grass, headed directly toward Uchida.

"Look out, Uchida!" I shouted.

But he stopped, staring at the little Sea rolling toward him, not moving at all. He was so surprised, his body had frozen up. The little Sea reflected the sunlight, glittering, like a piece of the sky rolling across the grass.

The lady picked the Penguin II probe up from the ground at her feet.

Then she swung her arm back and threw it.

The stout LEGO probe puffed up as it flew through the air, changing into a penguin. Flippers flapping, it flew over to Uchida. A moment later, it slipped inside the little rolling Sea. The Sea shook like a round ball of Jell-O. The penguin seemed to turn over inside The Sea, and then The Sea exploded. Like when an old thermometer

shatters, and the mercury inside comes spilling out. Large softball-size pieces went rolling across the grass, gleaming.

The penguins that defeated Suzuki gathered around, sticking their beaks in the fragments of The Sea, shattering those until they vanished like mist. The penguins all moved their beaks happily.

Uchida flopped to the ground, surrounded by penguins.

“Well, kids. Have fun with your research!”

The lady waved a hand and set off across the clearing to the north. A number of penguins waddled after her like they were following their mother around, but she ignored them, walking quickly away. The penguins were left behind, standing on the grass, looking sad.

“Hey!” I said, waving. The lady turned around at the entrance to the clearing and waved back.

Then she vanished into the darkness of the woods. As fast as if a neutrino had cut across the clearing.

“What is even happening?” Hamamoto said.



I had to record this new discovery.

☐ Penguins can destroy The Sea.



I went on a drive with my father.

We went toward the university, down the bus route that reminded me of a seaside highway. We passed through the university buildings to a narrow road that led into the mountains. We went up and down over the mountains and under a big highway.

“I wonder where this road goes,” my father said.

“I wonder,” I said.

I liked going for drives with my father.

When we left the house, we never had a destination in mind. He’d just pick roads out of curiosity. “Where does this one go?” I didn’t know where we’d end up. Neither did my father. When he put his hands on the wheel and muttered, “Let’s see where this road goes,” I felt like the asphalt before us led to places my father had never seen, possibly to the ends of the earth. But we never made it to the ends of the earth. We’d reach unknown towns, take a rest at a café or hamburger shop in that town, and then drive back home.

That day, we found a town built on a hill.

A big road went up a hill with houses on both sides and not a lot of pedestrians. The sunlight was pouring down, and everything around us was quiet. It was only two o'clock, but the sunlight hitting the houses made it look more like it was evening. Very mysterious. On the way to the water tower at the top of the hill, we saw a brown building with a fitness center in it. There was a café inside, so we pulled into the parking lot and went in.

The café was air-conditioned and very cool. My father drank coffee, so I did, too. My father took his black, but I put sugar in mine. Mother doesn't know I drink coffee. She wouldn't be happy if she knew, so I only drank it when I was out driving with my father. I was slowly reducing the amount of sugar I used, training myself to drink real coffee.

"Let's stop at a bookstore on the way home," my father said. "Did you read that book on the space station?"

"I did. I used it as a reference to help build my LEGO space station."

"What part did you like best?"

To get my father to buy me a new book, I had to pass my father's test. He would always ask what I liked best about the last book he bought me, and I would have to explain it to him. If I didn't pass that test, he wouldn't buy me a new book—that was the rule. But I'd never failed the test.

I told my father the things I'd been most interested in concerning the space station's structure and history. My father nodded as he listened. At the end, he said, "I see. When you're grown-up, do you think we'll all be able to travel through space?"

"I think it will be extremely expensive."

"That's a shame."

"But if we can make a space elevator, maybe it will get easier. And then Uchida and I can go."

"Uchida wants to go to space, too?"

"...Maybe he wouldn't actually go. He's scared of black holes. But I think the odds of being sucked into a black hole just because you've gone to space are quite low."

"However low those odds may be, that might not be enough to convince Uchida."

"Yes. In that case, we'll just have to go see a rocket take off together. We've agreed to do that."

We could see the parking lot from the café window. Grown-ups were going to and from the fitness center. I knew that inside the fitness center, there were a bunch of machines that would let them run or walk forever without ever getting anywhere, like the exercise wheels we give hamsters. I've always thought these machines were

very strange.

"When I go driving with you, I always feel like we'll end up at the ends of the earth."

"That would be interesting."

"But I know the ends of the earth aren't anywhere close. I'm in the fourth grade now, after all. I know the ends of the earth are much, much farther away. And the ends of the universe."

"That's not entirely true," my father said, totally serious. "The ends of the earth aren't far away at all."

"They aren't?"

"I don't think so. In my way of thinking, the ends of the earth aren't always on the outside. Take wormholes, for example. There might be a wormhole on the table between us. Perhaps it only exists for a moment, which is why we can't see it."

I looked at my coffee cup. I imagined an entrance to another universe opening and closing right next to it. If that happened, it would definitely be very interesting.

"The ends of the earth are folded up inside the world," my father said.

This was a very strange idea.

Maybe that's why I always felt like I was on the verge of discovering them.

My father took a sip of coffee, smiling. "Is your research on the lady getting anywhere?"

"It is extremely difficult."

"The other day, I had a chance to talk to her at the university. She's very smart, and definitely interesting, but also quite mysterious. The dentist said the same thing."

"The more I research, the less I understand."

"I don't know what sort of research you're doing, but you remember what I told you before?"

"About identifying what the problem is?"

"What problem is it you're trying to solve?"

"I don't know yet. I have found a number of different problems, and all of them are extremely difficult."

"Maybe that means you're getting closer to an answer."

"How so?"

"Perhaps the true nature of all those problems is the same."

"Is that possible?"

"Sometimes."

I took out my notebook and wrote *All the problems might be the same*. I would have to consider the meaning of those words later and decide if the Penguin Highway and The Sea weren't actually different problems, but the same research topic.

"I'll think about it."

"Make sure you record each day's discoveries," my father said. "Always go over those discoveries and organize them."

He finished his coffee.



Hamamoto's blue notebook had a record of The Sea's size. She made good use of grid-lined paper to draw very accurate graphs. According to these graphs, the size of The Sea had been constantly increasing, but lately, that increase had been slowing down.

We were on the grass under the parasol, engaged in a Joint Research Meeting. Hamamoto had her white hat pulled down over her eyes and was sitting in the folding chair. She had her knees grumpily pulled up to her chest and wasn't saying much. Uchida was sitting next to me on the grass, anxiously looking up at her. We knew exactly why she was in a bad mood; it was because I'd kept it a secret that the lady could make penguins.

Hamamoto was conducting an interrogation from that chair.

"Aoyama. You've known the whole time?"

"I have."

"That's not fair! I told you about my research on The Sea. But you didn't tell me about your research. I wanted to know where the penguins come from, too!"

"I had no choice but to keep it a secret. I'd promised the lady I would. And I was worried that if I told anyone else about the penguins, the lady would be captured by researchers."

"I can keep a secret!"

"I know you can."

"But you didn't trust me."

"That's not true." I didn't know what else to say.

"But Hamamoto," Uchida said, "you know now. So...isn't that good enough?"

"Don't keep things like that a secret ever again. It can obstruct our research!"

"That's true," Uchida admitted.

"You're right about that, Hamamoto. I thought our research on The Sea and my research on the Penguin Highway were two different things. But if we look over all the discoveries we've made, I think it's clear The Sea and the penguin appearances are connected. Researching them separately won't ever solve the problem. Because this is all one problem."

"Exactly!" Hamamoto said, pointing at me.

Uchida hung his head. "I had no idea."

“So I regret keeping my Penguin Highway research a secret from you both. And I’d like to formally ask for your assistance researching the lady.”

Hamamoto and Uchida considered my proposal.

Hamamoto frowned.

“I don’t believe that woman is telling you the truth, Aoyama. Does she really not know why she can make penguins?”

“It’s a mystery to her, as well.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I mean... She’s the one doing it.”

“But she’s not a bad person, and she wouldn’t lie to me about the penguins. She doesn’t know. That’s why she asked me to research the topic.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Are you sure you’re not just saying that because you hate the dentist?”

“That’s not true!”

“You’re fighting again,” Uchida said. “Eat some sweets.”

Hamamoto poured some ice-cold tea from a thermos into some paper cups. I took out three Boob Cakes from my rucksack. “Everyone’s going to be on edge, so I think you’d better bring sweets,” Uchida had said, so I’d bought these before entering the Jabberwock Woods.

While we were drinking tea and eating Boob Cakes, Hamamoto seemed to calm down a little.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

When the Joint Research Meeting ended, we observed The Sea for a while. It had shrunk a bit, but no particularly noteworthy phenomena appeared. Occasionally, we’d see a penguin waddle past at the edge of the woods, and Hamamoto shouted “Penguin!” every time.

Our plan to send a second probe into The Sea was currently postponed. The Penguin I had vanished, and the Penguin II had turned into a real penguin—it was probably still wandering around the woods somewhere. And construction of the Penguin III was not yet complete. Losing so many LEGOs was a real issue, and we didn’t have replacements for the thermometer and penlight that had been installed in the Penguin I. Also, based on the mysterious optical phenomenon the other day, we had a hypothesis that The Sea might be making fun of us, which was cause for concern.

Uchida was getting ready to fly a kite he’d made. We helped. I cut beautiful photos out of the magazine the dentist had given me, and Uchida glued them to his kite.

At last, we had a bright, beautiful kite.

We had a great time flying it over the clearing.

For the next week, my family went to my grandparents' house. We drove there every summer once my father's summer vacation started.

I was sad I couldn't observe The Sea, but I couldn't exactly stay behind on my own. And if I didn't go with them, I knew my grandparents would be extremely sad. In this case, my grandparents were my father's parents. The day before I left, I spoke to Hamamoto and Uchida and said, "The research is in your hands."

My grandparents' house was a two-hour drive from where we lived. It was a much older town than ours. There was a small mountain behind their house, and in the summer, you could always hear cicadas. Deep in the mountain, there was a small pond, almost a big puddle. Next to the house was a field where my grandfather grew vegetables. While we were staying there, I would walk close behind my grandfather, helping tend to the vegetables.

I liked my grandfather.

He walked slowly and took his time when he spoke. I didn't know anyone else who talked as slowly as he did. If I talked too much, he would always say, "Slow down, I can't keep up."

My grandfather loves sweet things, so when we went out for a walk together, he'd always buy me some sweets. We would eat those sweets next to a fire we'd made in a hollow near the field or while walking through the bamboo groves in the mountains. While I was spending time with my grandfather like this, he'd tell me all sorts of stories. All the countries he went to when he was young, or stories about when my father was in college. I wrote all of these down in my notebook later.

In the evening, I went to my grandfather's room to show him my notes, and he was extremely impressed.

"You're quite the scholar," he said.

My grandfather's room had a lot of old books and tools, and it always smelled of incense. He hated organizing his room, and he hated it when anyone else moved his stuff. His room had an old, comfy green couch for him to sit in and a small wooden chair. He would sit in the house, pour coffee from a thermos, add sugar, and drink that. I'd sit on the little wooden chair and talk with him. His room was extremely messy, and I couldn't tell where anything was. I'd given him a map, but I had no idea where he'd put it. But my grandfather just said "I'm sure it's somewhere" and drank his coffee. "As long as it's somewhere, there's no problem."

My grandmother was nothing like my grandfather.

I liked my grandmother, too.

She was always working in the house and talked faster than any of

us. According to my father, she'd talked even faster when she was young, and when she got angry, nobody could understand what she was saying at all. While she was working in the house, she would tell me how to clean rooms or organize things. She's the one who taught me that dividing everything up properly was extremely pleasing. My grandmother had three rules.

- ☐ Divide things you often use from things you only sometimes use.
- ☐ Divide things you definitely can't lose from things you don't care if you lose.
- ☐ Don't divide things that are hard to divide.

My grandmother divided up all kinds of things and put them away in a big chest with lots of drawers. I liked watching my grandmother organize these drawers. When I was with her, watching, she'd pull all manner of strange things out of the drawers and make me guess what they were for. She even had broken plates and wine corks in there. She threw things away that she didn't use, so everything in there was something that still had use, but it was not easy to identify what that use was. The more lost I was, the happier she got.

The only part of the house she didn't organize was my grandfather's room.

"If I cleaned in there, I feel like it would kill him," she said. "So I never do."

My mother said my father took after my grandmother. But part of him was also like my grandfather.

"Normally, he's a lot like your grandmother. But when he's focused on his work, he gets more and more like your grandfather," my mother said.

When we were staying at my grandparents' house, our family slept in an empty room on the second floor. At first, it bothered me that it smelled differently from our house. Just as I got used to the smell and was comfortable sleeping there, it was time to go home.



After a week away at my grandparents' house, we came back home, and the next day was one of those mid-vacation school days. I hadn't been to school in ages, and some of the children had shocking tans. It was astonishing how much spending time in the sun could transform people. I never really got all that tan.

While we waited for the teacher, I talked to Hamamoto and Uchida about what I'd done at my grandparents' house. Then

Hamamoto looked up.

“Suzuki’s acting weird,” she said. “I wonder why.”

I turned around and took a look at him. He was sitting at his desk, staring into space. That wasn’t like him at all. Everyone else in class was excitedly talking to friends they hadn’t seen in a while, but it was dead quiet around Suzuki, like he was in the eye of a typhoon. Kobayashi and Nagasaki both looked uncomfortable, as if they were afraid to approach him.

While I was observing him, Suzuki glanced up and saw me staring. He avoided my eyes.

“Suzuki’s being really quiet,” Uchida said. “I wonder what’s wrong?”

I’d never seen the Suzuki Empire emperor sitting alone, lost in thought.

A warm breeze blew in the open windows, making the big cream-colored curtains flutter. The classroom was full of happy voices, but one odd rumor was making the rounds. Uchida heard it first and made sure to tell me.

A kid from another class had witnessed a strange creature in the drain north of the athletic field.

That drain went under the bus route through a ten-meter-long dark tunnel. It was used for Tunnel Diving, one of the Suzuki Empire’s famous punishments. The drain was designed to help the water run off when it rained a lot, so most of the time, it was dry, and you could make it through the tunnel on all fours. I’d explored it myself once. Voluntarily.

Anyway, the kid in question was trying to go through this tunnel when they saw a large creature lurking in the dark. The creature was wet and smelly, like a fish. It was about the size of a large dog. But it had no fur anywhere—its skin was smooth. It was big and round, so the kid couldn’t tell where the head was. While the kid was still astonished by it, the creature suddenly jumped up, stretched out, and ran off down the other side of the tunnel, footsteps echoing through the tunnel. The ground where it had been curled up had been soaking wet.

“A new species?” Uchida asked.

“Could be just a stray cat or dog. Maybe it got wet in the rain and was taking shelter there.”

“But it wasn’t raining.”

What a weird story.

There wasn’t much to do on days like this, so school ended before lunch.

In the afternoon, I went to the dentist for an examination. I figured it was best to have them make sure I hadn’t developed any

new cavities while I wasn't looking. When I stepped into the dentist's office, Suzuki was already sitting there, just like last time. He was as out of it as he'd been at school, just staring up at the silver mobile with all the fish on it. When he noticed me standing there, he twitched. Then he avoided my eyes.

I started flipping through a magazine. "Suzuki," I said. "That last fight was extremely rough. If the penguins hadn't shown up, I think I would have lost."

Suzuki didn't say anything.

"But I'm glad you explored the river. Now the town map is much better. The fact that the river behind the school flows down to that clearing is a great discovery."

Suzuki didn't really respond to my praise. Something was very odd about him.

"You're acting weird today, Suzuki."

He scowled. "I'm not weird! You're weird. You and those penguins."

"There sure were a lot of penguins. I was surprised, too."

"Why were there so many penguins there?"

"Maybe someone's pets escaped."

"Don't just make things up! You're such a liar."

"I said maybe. I'm just suggesting a possibility. That's not a lie."

"You're talking nonsense again!" Then he lowered his voice. "Why can the lady here control those penguins?"

"That is a mystery."

"Not the only one," he whispered. "There was that weird floating thing in that field."

"You mean the gas coming out of the ground? What about it?"

I waited, but he just stared into space, saying nothing.

"Something bothering you?"

"Forget it."

"Nothing you want to talk to me about?"

"Nope."

Suzuki said nothing else.

"If there isn't, that's fine. I won't force it out of you."

He spent the rest of the time in silence. By the time my examination was done, he was already gone.

While I was sitting on the couch waiting to be called, the lady came out of the exam room. She sat down next to me. Her weight made the seat shift, and I was pulled toward her like my gravity was being influenced by a large sun.

"You said something to Suzuki again, kiddo?" she asked. "He's acting weird."

"I didn't say anything."

“Really? Look at my eyes and swear.”

I looked her in the eye and said, “I didn’t say anything.” “Hmm,” she said. “Then maybe he’s just scared of me now. Because I set the penguins on him.”

“That might be it. It might not be, though. Suzuki’s been acting strange all day.”

There wasn’t anyone else waiting, so after I paid, I talked quietly with the lady for a few minutes.

“I was pretty surprised when you suddenly made a penguin in front of the others. A moment earlier and Suzuki’s group would have seen! You should be more cautious with that stuff.”

“Sorry. Uchida seemed like he was in trouble.”

“Well, you did save him.”

“Right?”

“Did you know the penguins could damage The Sea?”

“I didn’t know that. I just threw one.”

“That experiment proves The Sea and the penguins are connected. I’d like your help researching The Sea. But Hamamoto’s against it. I’ll need to persuade her first.”

The lady looked at me and grinned.

“That’ll be pretty difficult,” she said.

“Really?”

The lady thought for a moment, then patted me on the knee.

“If you want to patch things up with her, why don’t you all go to the pool together?”

“That sounds extremely enjoyable. I’m good at swimming.”



Emperor Suzuki came to the clearing alone a few days after we saw him at school.

He stopped at the entrance to the Jabberwock Woods, watching us.

I was playing chess with Hamamoto, and Uchida had his arms folded in front of his notebook, thinking. Hamamoto looked up from the chessboard, glanced at the forest, and hissed, “Suzuki’s here.”

The supreme ruler of the Suzuki Empire had no one with him. He stood next to the hammock we’d strung up near the forest entrance, glaring at us in silence. He didn’t come into the clearing. When he saw us looking, he turned as if he was leaving but came back and again stopped at the border between the forest and the clearing.

“Maybe he’s here to challenge you to a duel.”

“I don’t want to duel him.”

“Duels are so boring,” Hamamoto said. She stood up and waved at

him. "What are you doing here? Do you want something?" she called.

Even then, Suzuki stayed in the forest, so we walked over to him.

Suzuki said nothing, just pointed at the thing in his hand. The exploration map Uchida and I made that he'd confiscated from us. He spread it out and showed us an awkward, wriggly line representing the drain, drawn from the back of the school through the town and the forest. "Are you giving this back?" I asked. He nodded. He showed none of the energy he'd had the other day when they attacked our observation station. He kept glancing at The Sea.

Hamamoto seemed rather taken aback by this. "So you aren't here to fight?"

"No."

"Suzuki, if you want to talk about something, come over to the observation station."

"I'm good here."

He looked at The Sea again. He stood like that awhile, hands scrabbling at his short-cropped hair. I'd never seen Suzuki this thoroughly at a loss.

"If you say nothing, we can't understand," Hamamoto said, getting angry.

Suzuki looked angry, too.

"Really weird things are going on!"

"Weird things?"

"And you know something, right?"

"If you explain properly, we promise to listen."

At last, Suzuki started explaining what had happened to him.

It started the other day when the Suzuki Empire had attacked our observation station.

That day, the lady had yelled "Go, penguins!" and in the chaos of the penguin assault, Suzuki had beat a hasty retreat back into the Jabberwock Woods. He'd assumed Kobayashi and Nagasaki were following, but they didn't come running after him. *Lazy bums!* Suzuki thought. He'd turned around just in time to see them run off in a different direction.

Suzuki tried to go after them, but right then, he heard Hamamoto yell, "Prominence!" *What?* he thought, peering through the trees into the clearing just in time to see a large ball of water go flying across the grass, directly toward him.

Ah, he thought, closing his eyes. He felt like a giant ball of Jell-O wrapped around his body and then moved away behind him. Nothing else happened. Cautiously, he opened his eyes and found himself still standing in the forest. He wasn't wet or anything. Or injured. But when he looked back at the clearing, there was no one where we'd been a second before. The lady and the three of us were gone.

Suzuki thought this was a little weird but ran off through the Jabberwock Woods, trying to catch up with his minions. But he couldn't find them anywhere. He left the woods and went to Kobayashi's house but was told they'd just left to go play at Suzuki's house. Suzuki was starting to get really concerned.

He walked off toward the row of zelkova trees and found Kobayashi and Nagasaki running out of his house. Suzuki was about to yell for them but saw another boy coming out of the house after them. *Who's he?* he thought. When this new boy turned his head to say something to Kobayashi, Suzuki noticed the boy looked exactly like him. He was so surprised, he almost screamed aloud. He quickly hid behind a telephone pole, watching his double walk away with his friends.

Suzuki went inside, and his mother was surprised to see him. "What's up? You're back already?" she said.

He looked at the clock. It had been almost evening, but the clock said it was just after lunch. His head was spinning, and he was totally confused, so he went to his room to lie down on his bed and then fell asleep.

In the evening, his mom woke him up, and he went to the front door to find Kobayashi and Nagasaki there. They were pissed. They accused him of ditching them and going home to sleep. Suzuki tried to explain what had happened to him but couldn't find the words. The more he muttered, the angrier they got. Eventually, they stormed off.

Suzuki spent some time being scared the other Suzuki he'd seen would come home, too. So scared he hadn't been able to eat a bite that evening.

But that had been the end of his strange experience.

"I know it sounds weird! You think I'm an idiot, right?"

We hadn't said a word, but he just kept yelling.

"I know Kobayashi and Nagasaki think I'm an idiot!"

"It's definitely a strange story," I said.

"But it really happened! I'm not making it up! Who was that with my face? Did that thing that came flying at me make me crazy?"

"Your experience is definitely a mystery, Suzuki. But I don't think you're crazy. We've been researching that strange thing you touched."

"Do you have any proof you aren't lying?" Hamamoto asked.

"I said I'm not!" he insisted, turning red. "It's all true!"

It was getting dark around us. The light of the evening sun behind the trees was turning the far side of the clearing red. The Sea was still glittering. We had to get through the Jabberwock Woods before night fell.

"If you're researching it, tell me what that thing is!"

"We can't do that," Hamamoto said.

“Why not?”

“Because this is our research. We can’t talk about it to outsiders.”

“Aoyama, what was that boy who looked like me? Tell me!”

“I need more time to research this before I can say anything. And if you want to know the truth, you should try asking nicely.”

Suzuki screwed his face up, furious. “You’re not fair!”

“We’re being totally fair.”

“You’re all weird! Sneaking about! That stuff with the penguins and that weird thing floating there! You’re all plotting something!”

“We aren’t plotting anything. Just doing research.”

“If you won’t tell me, I’ll tell everyone you’re doing weird stuff in the forest! Then you’ll have to confess everything!”

“That would be a problem. That would be a detriment to our research.”

Hamamoto took a step forward. “Tell them whatever you like,” she said. “You know what’ll happen if you do. I’ll never forgive you for it. I’ll hate you for the rest of my life.”

That shut him up.

He definitely didn’t want Hamamoto to hate him forever.

She suddenly turned back toward The Sea and let out a loud cry.

We all turned, assuming The Sea had activated. But it merely floated silently above the clearing, just like always.

“Did you see something, Hamamoto?”

“No,” she said, totally cool. “I was just faking it.”

When we turned back, Suzuki was long gone. He’d fled in terror. He was really scared of The Sea.



That night, I fought off sleep, scowling at my notebook, researching Suzuki’s experience.

I decided the following facts were the most important:

- ☐ Suzuki saw another Suzuki.
- ☐ It was evening when he was in the forest, but noon at home.
- ☐ Kobayashi and Nagasaki thought he’d run away first.

These facts led me to the following hypothesis:

“Passing through The Sea made Suzuki travel back in time.”

Of course, this was only a hypothesis.



Behind the station was a place called the Welfare Pension Relaxation Center, which had a large pool. In the summer, it got very crowded. They had waterslides and sold chocolate mint ice cream and yakisoba by the side of the pool. I was extremely fond of chocolate mint ice cream. There was a current in the pool, like a river.

When our school had a swim meet, all the students in our year did an experiment to learn the true power of water. All the students got in the water, walking around the edge of the pool. This gradually created a current, and the water in the pool started to spin. Even when we tried to stop walking, the flow of the water pushed us along. When the teachers clapped their hands and said "Now backward!" we all tried to walk in the other direction. We were all shouting, straining our feet on the bottom. But it was really hard work. The force of the water was extremely powerful. I thought about how salmon swim upstream to lay eggs and was very impressed by how much energy that must take. None of us were salmon, so we just wound up screaming and getting swept away.

It was an extremely interesting experiment.

It was more fun to float in moving water than in water that didn't move. I think whoever invented pools with currents was very clever.

It was a beautiful day with weather like the south sea islands. The lady had offered to take us to the pool, so we all gathered outside the dentist's office at ten. The lady was wearing a navy-blue baseball hat like a boy. When I got to the dentist, Hamamoto and Uchida were already there. Hamamoto's chestnut hair had been cut short, making her look like someone from another country. "Your hair is shorter," I pointed out. "Yep," she said.

Like we were about to go exploring, the lady pointed at each of us, counting us, and said, "Let's get going!" We all got on the city bus and rode it to the station.

We got to the pool and changed, and the lady made us do some very thorough warm-up exercises. "If you don't warm up properly before you get in the pool, you could have a heart attack and die," she said.

It was summer vacation, so the pool was extremely crowded. The surface of the water was reflecting so much sunlight, it looked almost white. Children and adults alike were riding the current. The sound of the water sloshing mingled with the cries of the swimmers, making my head spin. The waterslides were framed with cumulonimbus clouds. It looked like I could reach up and eat them like the soft-serve ice cream sold at the poolside concession stand.

The lady was sleek like a dolphin. The intense stretching routine was making her breasts move around. Looking at the lady's breasts, I realized that dolphins were mammals, so they must have breasts

somewhere. But where did dolphins put their breasts? How did baby dolphins nurse? Wouldn't seawater get mixed in, making everything salty? I thought about it some more. If dolphins had breasts, then blue whales did, too. Blue whale babies were bigger than I was when they were first born, so blue whale breasts must be so big, you would never even think they were breasts.

"Kiddo," the lady said loudly. "Where are your eyes?"

"I was lost in thought."

"Liar!"

"It's the truth."

"You can't just stare at people's boobs."

"I wasn't. I was thinking about breasts, but not your breasts."

The lady sighed. "I know why Suzuki hates you so much."

After that, the lady finally gave us permission to get in the pool. The pool's current moved us slowly along. "No need to swim," the lady said, just floating. Uchida was sitting on a swim tube, grinning happily. He liked swim tubes. Hamamoto grabbed Uchida's swim tube and shook it, and he yelped. Hamamoto laughed.

We went around the pool twice, and then I started swimming underwater. Shoving the water aside with all my might, I swam so fast I surprised even myself. Like a rocket flying through outer space. And I was picking out a clear path, easily sliding between the other people. I made astounding progress.

Satisfied I was swimming faster than anyone else, I came to the surface.

And was surprised to see the lady's face in front of me—I'd thought I'd left her behind. Her face was so close, I could see the drops of water running down it. She cackled. "And you thought you were fast!"

"I admit you are also fast."

"Thanks. But I'm tired from being so fast, so I'm gonna rest a bit."

The lady slipped across the water to the side of the pool and climbed out. Her backside gleamed like a dolphin in the light. She turned around and waved at us.

I swam slowly, letting Uchida and his swim tube catch up.

"Hmm? Where's Hamamoto?" I asked.

"We got split up. But that's okay. I don't like it when she plays tricks on me. She keeps trying to pull me under."

"That is a problem."

I drifted with him for a while.

"Uchida, what do you make of the fact that blue whales must have breasts?" I asked.

"If you keep talking like that, the lady's gonna scold you again," Uchida said, shaking his head. "You like breasts too much, Aoyama."

"It's not that I like them. I'm just researching them."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"I don't think it always is."

I swam alongside him, talking about different breast-related topics. Uchida didn't really respond much. He did not appear to be very interested in breast research.

"Hamamoto doesn't have any breasts," I said. "She's not a grown-up."

"Strange! Very strange." Uchida was making a weird face.

While I was thinking about breasts that existed and breasts that didn't, Hamamoto came popping out of the water next to us and grabbed Uchida's ring. He yelped and went under. Hamamoto laughed. Hamamoto's interest in making him sink seemed like a real problem.

After a while, I got out of the pool before them. I went walking along the side of the pool looking for the lady. She had sunglasses on like a movie star and was sitting on a chair under a parasol with one elbow on the table. She was drinking Coke through a straw from a transparent cup.

I sat in the chair opposite her, and she handed me a bath towel.

"I'll buy everyone some ice cream later," she said.

"They'll be thrilled."

"Look at those clouds! Amazing, right?"

I looked up at the sky. The cumulonimbus clouds were still there. The poolside was really noisy, but above those fluffy clouds was another world, where really strong winds blew. I think about that a lot.

"Hamamoto still doesn't trust me," the lady said.

"It's a real challenge."

"What matters to me is whether you can solve this mystery or not."

"I have an extremely large number of problems to solve."

"You still moaning about that?"

"But according to my father, what seems to be a lot of problems might actually be one big problem."

"What do you think is the biggest mystery?"

"Probably The Sea."

"The Sea...? That's a nasty one. I really don't get it."

"The penguins and your ability both seem connected to The Sea. At least, that's what I think."

"You proceed how you think best. I really have no idea."

The lady took a sip of her Coke. Then she looked back along the poolside.

As I gazed at her profile, I remembered observing her as she slept

on the floor the day I visited her in the white apartment building by the water-tower hill. I'd recorded the details of that day in my notebook and would record the events of today as well. That way, no matter how far in the future it was, I would be able to recall the time spent with her in detail.

But it occurred to me that being with the lady like this and remembering being with her were two totally different things. I felt like being here with her, by the side of the pool, where it was extremely hot, with the sound of the water and people swimming ringing in my ears, looking up at the soft-serve cumulonimbus above us... All of this was vastly different from reading the sentences I would write about it later. More different than I had ever previously thought. Extremely different.

I thought about this some more, but I couldn't figure out how to record that feeling properly.

"Hey, kiddo," the lady whispered. "If I couldn't make penguins anymore, would you stop researching me?"

"I don't think I would."

"Why not?"

"Because you are an extremely fascinating person."

I looked out at the sparkling pool. Hamamoto and Uchida had done another loop of the pool and were waving at us. Children and adults were sitting on all manner of floats, the sunlight gleaming on their wet skin. Their laughter echoed all around us, yet it felt like a sound from some far-off realm.

The lady put both arms on the table, gazing absently at the water.

"Would be nice if we can go to the beach before summer vacation's over," she said. "You want to see the ocean, right, kiddo?"



We gathered in the clearing to observe The Sea.

Hamamoto was drawing a graph in her notebook, and Uchida was watching with interest. According to Hamamoto's observations, The Sea had peaked in size and was waning again. There were occasional waves on the surface but no large-scale phenomenon like the Prominence.

I was sitting under the parasol drawing a chart in my notebook in an attempt to explain the Suzuki Time Travel Hypothesis. But this was an extremely bold hypothesis. Uchida and Hamamoto had both been skeptical. "I think we need to experiment more," Hamamoto said. "Yeah," Uchida said. I thought they were right.

"We could ask Suzuki to go in The Sea again," Hamamoto suggested. She seemed to mean it.

“Suzuki was so scared of it, though. He’d never do it,” Uchida said.

“Proving this hypothesis will be extremely difficult. And even if we wait for another Prominence and have someone make contact with The Sea that comes flying out, this time, they might get sent back to the Cambrian period. They’d never be able to come back.”

“Should we use a probe?”

“Would you be able to throw a probe in when a Prominence occurs?”

“That would be difficult. And The Sea is waning now.”

We spent the morning observing The Sea and discussing things.

At noon, we ate lunch under the parasol, like we were having a picnic at the beach. Hamamoto and I had brought sandwiches, but Uchida used hot water from a thermos to make instant ramen. “Lucky,” Hamamoto said. Uchida seemed proud of himself. Eating instant ramen on the grass made it feel like a real campsite, which was lovely.

The lady came to help with our research after we’d finished eating lunch. I looked up from the chessboard to find her standing at the border between the Jabberwock Woods and the clearing, holding a parasol. She looked at me, grinned, dipped her parasol, and came toward us across the grass. Maybe it was just the strong sunlight, but she looked more pale than usual.

“It’s hot. Your research getting anywhere?”

“It is not making much progress,” I said. “The Sea doesn’t seem very active.”

“It seems smaller than it was last time.”

Hamamoto showed the lady her notes. “It’s waning right now,” she said. “I see,” the lady said. Then she looked at The Sea through some binoculars.

“That’s actually a spaceship,” the lady said. “I came to earth aboard that ship to conquer all of you.”

The shock of this was so great, we fell silent.

“Really?” Uchida said.

“No,” the lady said. She always lied with such a straight face it was hard to tell.

“What do you actually think it is?” Hamamoto asked.

“Good question. You’re the ones researching it. How would I know?”

“What about the connection between The Sea and the penguins?”

“I dunno.”

“Why can the penguins damage The Sea?”

“That was a surprise.”

Hamamoto peppered the lady with questions like this was an

interrogation, but the lady just smiled and answered almost none. Hamamoto chewed on her ballpoint pen, frustrated.

As an experiment, we asked the lady to make a penguin.

I got a can of Coke out of my rucksack and had her hold it. She stepped out from under the parasol.

“Kids, watch this.”

We held our breaths, and she threw the can, and it did turn into a penguin, which went rolling across the grass. No matter how many times I saw this phenomenon, it remained extremely strange. The penguin righted itself and came walking over to the lady. She stuck out her index finger and drew a circle with it. The penguin stopped, surprised, following her finger with its eyes.

“The penguin’s getting dizzy,” Hamamoto said.

“You’re so cute!” the lady said, talking to the penguin. “All serious!”

The penguin got tired of the lady’s finger and started staring absently up at the sky.

“I wonder if it’s hot,” Hamamoto said.

“These penguins seem to be fine with it,” I said.

I tried coming up with experiments that would tell us something about the connection between the penguins and The Sea. We couldn’t send a penguin into The Sea like a probe. If that broke The Sea, our research would come to an abrupt end. And if the penguin vanished like when we sent the first probe into The Sea, then we’d feel sorry for the penguin. I knew this situation was what they called a dilemma.

“I suppose we could try just moving it closer to The Sea?” Hamamoto suggested.

So I ended up holding the penguin as we all walked closer to The Sea.

As the penguin in my arms got closer, a tetrapod-shaped construct appeared on the surface of The Sea. “Oh!” the lady said. The tetrapod was like hardened blue Jell-O. I walked around The Sea with the penguin, and the tetrapod followed us, sliding around the surface.

I moved even closer.

“Careful...,” Uchida said behind me.

The penguin turned its beak toward The Sea but didn’t struggle. The tetrapod shook, wobbling, and collapsed, forming a mortar-shaped depression on The Sea’s surface. The inside of this depression was wobbling, too. It was like The Sea was afraid of the penguin. The shaking was growing more violent, and the surface shifted, a number of bat-size cones growing out of it.

“Look out, look out!” the lady said, clearly enjoying herself.

A moment later, one of the cones stretched out of The Sea toward me. Everyone screamed and ran away. I looked back as I ran and saw

a number of cones writhing about, as if searching for the penguin and me.

We made it back to the parasol and observed The Sea from there. All the cones were slowly shrinking. Soon it was back to normal.

After that, it was quiet.

I sat down on the grass, drawing a picture of the cones sticking out of The Sea. Hamamoto sat next to me, with her own notebook open. The lady and Uchida played with the penguin. When the lady bent down and clapped her hands together, the penguin would waddle toward the sound.

"She definitely knows more than she's admitting," Hamamoto whispered. I looked up and saw her frowning at the lady. "I'm sure she knows the penguin secrets and The Sea's secrets."

"She doesn't know. That's why we have to research it."

"You're too close to her, Aoyama. You can't think clearly."

"That's not true."

Hamamoto looked at me. "Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad. I never get mad. I'm totally calm 24-7."

"I think there are times you aren't."

"I want to know what makes you so suspicious."

Hamamoto snapped her notebook closed and chewed on her pen some more, saying nothing.

"Over there!" Uchida called, pointing to the stream running through the clearing. Some penguins appeared at the border between the grass and the forest, all clustered up like just before they started jumping into the ocean. The penguin with the lady started flapping its flippers around. I couldn't tell if the penguins in the forest noticed it or not.

But I noticed the lady was a little unsteady on her feet.



On Saturday evening, I walked over to Seaside Café.

Cumulonimbus clouds were piled up over the mountains on the border. They were colored like they'd been splashed with strawberry syrup, so the clouds looked like a delicious dessert to me. I knew that clouds were clusters of water droplets. So why was it that every time I looked up at the clouds I wanted to eat them? Was it just my sweet tooth? As I walked along, imagining how sweet they'd be, the clouds changed shape, growing rounder. They reminded me of the lady's breasts.

The lady waved at me from her seat in the window of Seaside Café.

It was nice and cool inside. The air felt sleek. The silver blue

whale dangling from the ceiling swayed in the wind from the air conditioner. The lady had her chin in her hands, frowning as she wrote in her notebook. I hadn't seen her in a few days, and she looked like she'd lost weight again.

When I sat down opposite her, she closed her notebook and grinned at me.

"What were you writing?"

"My secret diary."

"It's a secret?"

"That's why I'm not showing it to you. Diaries are inherently things you never show anyone else."

"Are you observing yourself objectively?"

"There you go with the tough questions. Objectively?"

"Are you writing about me?"

"Of course I am," she said, smiling. "I'm researching you."

"I don't think you'll make any discoveries researching me."

"That's not true."

It had been a long time since the two of us played chess. As she glared at the chessboard, her face looked pale, and when she moved a piece, I thought her fingers looked frail. Her breasts seemed like they'd shrunk, too.

"You've lost weight," I said.

"I can't eat."

"Why can't you eat?"

"I dunno. Just no appetite."

While we played chess, all she drank was water. Could drinking too much water make you feel full? "Water is the source of life," she said, but the fish in the sea didn't live on water alone. Animals like us needed energy. I insisted she needed to eat some bananas or meat or an *oyakodon* soon for nourishment.

I won three games of chess in a row. "I give up!" the lady said. "No children are better at chess than you. I can't compete!"

"You aren't thinking clearly because you haven't eaten anything."

"But I don't want to eat."

"While I get hungry so easily."

"You get hungry easily and fall right asleep at night. That's a good thing!"

"You still can't sleep?"

"Not a lot, no."

She stared at the darkness outside. In the window, her reflection looked even thinner.

"Maybe you shouldn't make any more penguins."

"But then you couldn't do any more research."

"But I'm worried that you making penguins is making you unwell."

And if your power gets discovered, people from the government and TV will come. And university professors who want to experiment on you. Maybe even people from NASA. It will be a huge mess, and you won't have time to play chess with me anymore. And wouldn't that make you sad?"

"That's not gonna happen. No grown-ups would ever believe this."

"I think you can't be too cautious."

"I mean, you could try telling your father about it. I'm sure he wouldn't believe you."

"You're right. I don't know if he would."

"See?" she looked pleased. "And even if it does cause a fuss, I'd disappear before I ever let anyone experiment on me. So that's not a problem."

I thought it was a problem.

That evening, we worked up a plan to visit the seaside town. Once the lady's appetite came back and she was feeling a little better, we'd go together. If we took the train my father rode every day and changed trains twice, we could get to the coastal town where the lady used to live. I wrote the names of the train lines down in my notebook. It was much farther away than where my father worked. We would have to ride trains for three whole hours.

"There's a church next to the house where I used to live."

"Is it like the church here?"

"Even bigger."

"You used to go there?"

"I didn't. Back then, I only ever looked at it from the outside."

I didn't know if there was a God or not, and I didn't really get why she went to church.

"Is there a God?"

"Good question," the lady said, tilting her head. "I don't know."

"Even though you go to church?"

"You should ask your father if there's a God or not," the lady said.

Eventually, I started getting sleepy, and then my father came to get me. He noticed she'd lost weight, too. "You don't look so good," he said. "I hope he didn't wear you out."

"He was fine." The lady smiled and waved at me. "Good night."

I walked home through the darkened neighborhood with my father. The air at night soon grew cooler. There were a lot of stars in the sky. I was sure we could see even more stars from the camp in the clearing in the Jabberwock Woods. If we had a telescope, maybe we could see Saturn's rings. But thinking about being in the dark clearing surrounded by the dark forest with The Sea floating nearby was enough to scare even me. I wondered what The Sea looked like at night. Did it give off a silver light?

"The lady didn't look so good. She's clearly lost a lot of weight," my father said, sounding concerned.

"She said she's got no appetite."

"You shouldn't make her play with you when she's tired."

"I thought the same thing. I think I'll do that next time."

I thought about telling him about the penguins, but I just didn't feel like talking about them with him. Part of me wanted my father to believe me, but part of me hoped he wouldn't.



I woke to the sound of wind rattling the windowpanes. It was six thirty, so the sun should have been up, but it was as dark as a winter morning. What I could see of the sky through the gaps in the blinds was murky, like it had been dipped in ink, and the branches of the dogwoods in the garden were thrashing in the wind. A typhoon had arrived.

I sat in bed, observing the sky. Downstairs, I heard my mother seeing my father off for work. I looked through the water streaming down the glass and watched my father's back as he headed for the bus stop. The wind was pulling his umbrella everywhere. I was worried it would blow him away. I opened the window a crack, and a warm wet wind blew in, flecks of rain spraying my face.

I got myself ready. The hall and stairs were dark, too. I could hear windows rattling all through the house.

My mother was getting breakfast ready in the living room, but I explained the day's experiment to her. I was going to study the lady's condition by experimenting with not eating anything myself.

"So I won't need any meals today."

"I'm against this experiment."

"I'll eat twice as much tomorrow, so I should be fine for today."

"Moles will die if they don't eat once a day."

"I'm not a mole."

My mother reluctantly agreed.

"At least drink some orange juice."

This was an experiment, so I had to follow the same conditions as the lady.

"I'll drink some water."

"Lord!" my mother said, shaking her head. "Do what you like, then."

The rain and wind were too strong all day, so I couldn't leave the house. I cracked the window in my room and measured the strength of the wind blowing in with an anemometer I'd invented myself. My stomach was a constant distraction, even doing experiments like that.

I tried to write an objective record of my hunger levels in my notes, but I wasn't sure how to measure exactly how hungry I felt. I tried thinking of ways to compare how hungry the lady felt to how hungry I felt, but all I could think about was the demands of my own belly. If I'd had a stash of candy in my desk drawer, I'm sure I'd have gobbled it right up.

I didn't eat lunch, either.

Once I passed through the extremely painful period, it got much easier. I made a lot of walls out of LEGOs, like Hamamoto did. Then I was lying in bed for a while reading an illustrated guide to animals, but my stomach started rumbling again, and I couldn't concentrate on the book at all. I hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch. Thinking about skipping dinner made me want to cry.

In the afternoon, I went downstairs and drank some water.

My sister was plastered to the glass, staring out at the yard. A particularly strong gust of wind rattled the glass and scared her. "Whoa, that was scary!" she said. "Are the windows gonna break?"

"They won't," I said.

I didn't feel so great, so I decided to lie down on the floor in the living room. My sister sat next to me.

"Why won't you eat anything?" she said. "Are you sick?"

"I'm not sick."

"You look sick."

"Should we take a nap?" my mother suggested. She brought out towels. We put them over our bellies and sprawled out on the floor. My sister grumbled a bit but eventually drifted off. The way my sister was designed, all you had to do was put a towel on her, and she'd nod right off. I usually fell asleep pretty easily, too, but today I was so hungry, I was really struggling to sleep.

"You sure you don't need dinner?" my mom said, sounding sleepy.

"I don't."

"Sheesh. You must be starving!"

"But I made up my mind to do this experiment, so I'll endure it."

"You're so stubborn," she said. Then she fell asleep.

I stared up at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the typhoon beating against the entire house. I was starting to feel extremely sad. It was dark inside and outside, and I just didn't have the energy to do anything. I felt like the world once your belly emptied was a very sad place indeed.

Even then, it seems I eventually nodded off.

Someone was shaking my body. I sat up and found the house was even darker. The wind appeared to have died down a bit, but the sky was still overcast, and the rain was pounding down, leaving the back porch soaking wet. My mother was gone, her towel neatly folded. My

sister was flopped down next to me, looking worried, her towel wrapped around her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

My sister suddenly burst into tears.

“Mommy’s gonna die!” she said, crying. This really surprised me. I thought something extremely bad had happened to her while I was sleeping. I got to my feet. “Where is she?” I asked, but my sister just shook her head. I sat down next to her. “Why is Mom gonna die?” I asked patiently. I soon discovered that when my sister said “Mommy’s gonna die,” she meant “Mommy’s gonna die someday.” My sister had been thinking about the future and managed to scare herself.

“That won’t happen for a very long time,” I said.

“But she will die?” My sister was extremely scared. “And you and Daddy will, too?”

“That’s true.”

“But why?”

“Well, we’re all living things. All living things eventually die. Dogs and penguins and blue whales, too.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Well, you can’t have everything you want.”

She pulled the towel over her head, crying even harder. She must have woken up from her nap and found my mother had gone out somewhere, and with the house all dark from the typhoon, she’d felt lonely and started thinking all sorts of gloomy things.

I understood why my sister was crying.

Back when I still didn’t know anything and was selfish and spoiled, I’d done the same thing she had and realized that everyone I cared about would die one day, and I would never be able to see them again, and that had come as quite a shock. I’d known that all living things died eventually, but it had never occurred to me that that really, actually applied to me. No matter how lucky you were, no matter how much you didn’t want it, you could never escape that fate. And that fact felt like a huge dark wall looming over me.

I’d made this realization in the middle of the night, so I’d gone to my parents’ bedroom and tried to explain my discovery to them. But the discovery frightened me so much, I couldn’t say a single word. I felt like if I said a word about it, something extremely bad would happen.

Even faced with my sister’s tears, I was so hungry my head wasn’t working properly, and I couldn’t think of anything to say that would make her feel better. But even if I’d been full, I might not have thought of anything. I knew perfectly well that explaining that all living things die would never make sense to her. I remembered that night and how awful that fact had seemed.

So I stroked my sister's head as she cried.

That was the only thing I could do.

Eventually, my mother came home. She'd briefly run out on an errand.

"Whaaat? What's going on?" she asked brightly. She drew the curtains and turned all the lights on, and it was like all the anxiety we felt melted like snow.

I told my mother why my sister was crying.

"Oh dear, you poor thing," my mother said, giving my sister a hug.



That evening, while the others ate dinner, I was upstairs in my room.

I was feeling extremely sad, both because I was so hungry and because my sister had been crying. I didn't remember the last time I'd felt this sad, and the sadness was so great, I couldn't remember anything. I hadn't recorded anything like this in my notebook, so I had no way to check. I realized I had no way of accurately measuring how sad I felt. Just like I had no way of measuring how hungry I was.

I had no energy, so I was lying on my bed and staring out the window. The typhoon had passed, and the clouds outside were starting to have gaps between them. My nose was getting really sensitive, and I felt like I could smell all sorts of delicious scents rising up the stairs. I heard plates being laid out on the living room table and my sister calling my name. Until that moment, I never realized how much I loved my mother's cooking.

I thought about how much the lady must be suffering. I remembered how pale she'd looked and knew exactly why she'd been so listless.

I took out my notebook and organized my notes on the lady. Trying to forget how hungry I was, I noted every time the lady had felt good and every time she hadn't and made a list with dates. Then I made a chart that showed how she was feeling. It looked like a submarine rising and falling. When she was feeling too sick to see me at all I marked it zero; when she was able to call or send messages, one; when she met me but wasn't feeling good, two; when she was feeling fine, three; and when she could make penguins, a four. I took these values and made a graph with the dates on the horizontal axis. I connected all the dots with curves and got a wave of the lady's health.

Satisfied that I'd managed to accomplish this research despite being very hungry, I dived back into bed.

The next time I woke up, it was the middle of the night.

It was already tomorrow. I'd completed my experiment goal of not

eating for a full day. I didn't think I could stand to wait for morning, so I went downstairs. My sister and mother were already asleep, but the light was on in the living room. My father was watching TV and drinking booze. He turned when he heard my footsteps.

"Oh, you woke up," he said. "Bet you're starving."

"Dad. My energy has completely run out."

"That's quite an experiment," he said. "Wait right there." He got up and went to the kitchen. He took out some sandwiches my mother had made and warmed up some potato bacon soup in a pot. He put the soup on the table, steam rising off it, and I felt like I was eating the scent alone. When I took a bite, I was so happy, tears rolled down my cheeks. Big lumps of potato in the soup and the cheese in the sandwiches tasted better than anything else I'd ever eaten. I asked for more soup, eating everything he'd warmed up.

"Good, right?"

"Very."

"So what are the experiment results? You satisfied with them?"

"Yes. I accomplished my goal."



After the typhoon, the heat came back. It was now late August.

My mother told me about some strange rumors floating around town. Apparently, some mailboxes and vending machines had gone missing. And the row of streetlights along the bus route had vanished into thin air as well. That wasn't all; there were stories that several large birds that couldn't be found in any bird guide had been spotted on the high-tension towers, and some sort of monkey had been seen dancing in the evening on the water-tower hill. Someone else had seen a white fish or lizard-like thing walking on the road past the meeting hall.

"Ever since those penguins showed up, it's been one strange thing after another," my mother concluded.

The mailboxes and vending machines might simply be missing because someone stole them. The birds on the high-tension towers, the monkey on the water-tower hill, and the lizard-like creature on the road all might just be someone's pet that got away. But I felt like all these strange phenomena were connected to our research. Like my father said, it was quite possible all these problems were actually one problem.

I wanted to see the lady again, but I had no idea what she was up to since she stopped feeling good. I went to her apartment building once. I rang the intercom, but she didn't answer. I wanted her to eat something, so I hung a bag with orange juice and soft pastries from

her doorknob. I wrote *From Aoyama* on a piece of paper I tore out of my notebook and put that in the bag, too.

But from the graph I'd made, I estimated she would be feeling better soon. The graph showed a steady wave pattern, and I could tell the next recovery phase would be starting soon.

And the graph led me to my next discovery.



We were headed for the observation station.

As we stepped out of the Jabberwock Woods, Hamamoto said, "Hmm?" The Sea had been in a waning period, but now it was waxing again and was visibly larger than last time. Sunlight hammered down out of the blue sky, making The Sea sparkle. There were several whirlpools on its surface.

I sat under the parasol, reading my notes and indexing them. Uchida was flying a kite. Hamamoto sat next to me, making records of her observations of The Sea. She was using fluorescent markers to redraw her graph of The Sea's radius.

"You're really good at that, Hamamoto," I said.

"I know!" she said, grinning.

I took out my notebook, hoping to make a copy of her graph. As I was flipping through it, I found the graph I'd made of the lady's health. I'd been starving myself when I drew it, so it was a much messier graph than Hamamoto's. But their actual shapes were extremely similar.

"Look at this," I said, putting my notebook on the grass. I lined Hamamoto's notebook up right underneath it.

The two graphs showed waves fluctuating at the same pace. When The Sea was waxing, the lady got better. When The Sea was waning, the lady started feeling bad.

Hamamoto's eyes widened in surprise, but then she thought about it some more.

"But it's a little off. They aren't precisely aligned."

"Changes in The Sea are reflected in the lady a few days later. This peak and that one are the same distance apart. They're linked."

"Aoyama, this is amazing!" Hamamoto yelled. "This is a huge discovery!"

Hearing us yelling, Uchida came running over. When I explained our discovery to him, he said, "That is huge!" He looked really happy. "But...what does it mean?"

"It means the lady has a strong connection to The Sea."

"So?" Uchida asked.

"So..."

I thought about it. What did that mean? The lady made penguins. The penguins destroyed The Sea. The size of The Sea was linked to the lady's health. But what was that link?

"We've only just discovered this, so I don't have a hypothesis yet. We'll need to get more help from her and research this properly. Right now, she's not feeling well, so there's nothing we can do."

"You'd better be careful around her," Hamamoto said gravely. "I don't think you should tell her about this discovery."

"Why not?"

"What if she's actually an alien?"

Uchida looked worried. "She said she made that up!"

"If she is an alien, and The Sea is actually her spaceship, what then? If she thinks we've found out her secret, she might just kill us all."

"Your idea doesn't make sense," I said. "There's no way the aliens would ever have let us get this far."

"They might have let their guards down because we're children."

"You are very suspicious, Hamamoto."

"Why is it you trust her so much, Aoyama? Try to be objective."

"I am being objective. I wish you'd look at this logically."

"I think you're the one not being logical."

Hamamoto and I glared at each other.

Uchida waved his hands. "Don't fight," he said. "I don't think either of you is being logical right now!"

Hamamoto snorted.

"Aoyama, you only like the lady because you like boobs."

"I admit I do like breasts. But that's unrelated to why I like the lady."

"But the lady has boobs."

"That she does."

"Enough!" Hamamoto yelled.

Uchida and I both jumped.

I was thoroughly lost now. Hamamoto just bit her lip and refused to say anything, even if we tried talking to her. She sat under the parasol, her expression as frosty as an Ice Queen, building LEGO walls in silence. It was really uncomfortable to be around her, so Uchida and I took a walk across the clearing.

Once we were a safe distance away, Uchida turned around.

"That was a surprise. Didn't think she'd get that angry."

"It's a mystery."

"I don't always understand her," Uchida said. "But I think I do know why she got so angry this time."

"You do?"

"But I can't tell you. I don't know if I'm right or not."

“It would really help if you tell me anyway.”

Then we heard squeaking coming from the forest.

And what sounded like a bird screaming in pain.

Uchida grabbed my arm. “What was that?” he said. The sound came from the forest on the south side of the clearing. Something big hit a tree, and all the leaves rustled.

We saw something white moving through the darkness of the woods. There were too many trees to get a clear look, but it was about the size of a dog, with smooth white skin, and it glistened like it was wet. The arms and legs looked like a human’s. It was such a sinister sight none of us dared move a muscle.

After the white thing vanished into the depths of the forest, we heard the bird scream again.

“What was that?” Uchida said.

“Something very strange is going on,” I said.



I recorded this significant discovery in my notebook.

☐ When The Sea waxes, the lady gets better.

☐ When The Sea wanes, the lady gets worse.

Penguin Highway

Project Amazon Final Report.

Uchida and I decided to continue exploring the river. Hamamoto was still angry, and the lady was still not feeling well. If one research project was at an impasse, we had no choice but to advance another.

Our last expedition revealed that the stream running through the vacant lot behind our school also flowed behind the university. So our plan this time was to start from that location.

We met at the bus stop on the main road and took the bus bound for the university. We passed the city library, and the bus went onto the highway. From the windows, we could see the rice stalks growing high, like fields of overgrown grass. The sky was dotted with sheeplike clouds. Other than the loose tooth I had dangling by a thread, it was the perfect day for exploring.

As the bus rocked, I said, “The two of us haven’t gone exploring together in ages.”

“Yeah,” Uchida said happily.

We got out at the university stop on the side of the highway, and the heat made our heads spin. The sunlight made the university gate glitter. We could hear the rhythmic cries of the cicadas in the woods across the highway. The passing trucks kicked up a hot wind, hurling dust around. “The air’s filthy,” Uchida said.

We walked through the silent campus. Stepping through the passages between the buildings made it feel like we were in a labyrinth. The lights in the cafeteria were out, and there was a CLOSED sign hanging on the glass doors.

We reached the back of the campus, the spot we’d ended our previous expedition. The grass was high, and there were bugs flying everywhere. There was a fence on either side of the stream. We knelt down on the ground and spread out our map. We confirmed the direction with our compass.

The stream flowed around the exterior of the university campus grounds. Beyond that were neatly divided vacant lots, dry earth

divided into squares by concrete. Not all the lots were empty; some had strange buildings that looked like spaceships had landed.

“Are these research labs?”

“It’s like the future.”

But we didn’t have time to investigate those buildings further.

When we reached the back of the divided lots, there was an asphalt road running through the woods, and the drain ran along the right side of the road. I remembered seeing a road running through a forest like this before. It was a road I’d taken on a drive with my father. There were bamboo groves on the far bank of the drain, and the air felt cool.

There was a fork in the road ahead. The road to the left was the one my father had taken on our drive. The road to the right went into an old town. That’s where the drain went.

“I went down that road recently in the car with my father.”

“Where does it go?”

“I didn’t draw an accurate map, so I’m not really sure. But we ended up in a town built on the side of a hill. And we drank coffee in a café there. I always drink coffee when my father and I go exploring in the car.”

“You drink coffee? Like a grown-up!”

“But I don’t at home.”

“I do like coffee jelly.”

“Coffee jelly is way better. But it makes for good training.”

We walked between the old houses. These weren’t made of LEGO blocks like the houses where we lived. They had big stone walls and old tile roofs. Some had machines parked outside for plowing the fields. There were fields and paddies here and there, as well as a whole lot of dragonflies. An old woman working in the fields looked up, and I saw her wiping the sweat from her face with a towel. We could hear the jingling of some wind chimes. It was like we were at my grandparents’ house.

“We’ve come a long way,” Uchida said.

“It certainly feels very far away.”

“Aoyama, do you still feel like this river flows to the ends of the earth?”

“I do.”

“If that was really true, I’m sure it would be scary. That’s how I feel anyway.”

I thought this old town wasn’t as hot as ours. Probably because of all the rice paddies.

We’d walked a long way, so we laid out the blanket on the stone steps of a small shrine, making a base. Then we poured out some cold barley tea from a thermos and drank that while eating some steamed

cake from the rucksack.

The wind from the rice paddies dried our sweat.



A huge old pine tree was growing next to the shrine stairs. This shrine had been here since long, long before we were born, and this pine tree had clearly been alive long before we were born, too.

"Trees live way longer than people," I said.

"Yeah."

"Compared to the history of the earth, humans die very quickly."

"They really do."

I thought about the day my sister cried in the dark living room during the typhoon. That had been an extremely upsetting day, but now I was sitting here with Uchida on the cool stone steps, the heat of the sun shining down on us, and I didn't feel so upset.

I told him about my sister crying, and Uchida said, "I know how she feels."

"You think like that sometimes, too?"

"I do that all the time. Especially at night."

"Every day?"

"Every day. I'm scared that my father and mother will die someday, and I'm scared that I'll die, too. I wonder why we have to die and who decided that we should."

"But all living things die. You know that, right?"

"I know that. But knowing something and being okay with it are two different things." Uchida spoke very deliberately. "Two very different things."

"That's true. I've felt like that, too."

"So I understand how your sister felt."

After a while, Uchida took his notebook out of his rucksack. The same one he always wrote in at the observation station in the clearing. Uchida flipped through the notebook, his face like a philosopher. Then he said, "I've made a very strange discovery."

"And you'll tell me about it?"

"I dunno if I can explain. Maybe it'll just sound weird."

"That's okay. I want to hear it anyway."

"I'm only saying this because it's you. Don't tell Hamamoto or anyone else."

"Got it."

Uchida had called it a discovery, but he didn't seem proud of it. It was like sharing this discovery was a scary thing.

"I've been researching what death really means," he began. "The world after I die. About how when I die, everyone else will still be

alive, but I won't be able to think about how they're still alive anymore. I've been thinking about what that would be like. I thought about it for a really long time, and then I realized something. That maybe none of us actually die."

Uchida shot me an anxious glance.

I listened in silence.

"When other people die is totally different from when I die. These things are nothing alike. When other people die, I'm still alive. I'm watching death from the outside. But that's not true when I die. The world after I die isn't the world anymore. That's where the world ends."

"But to other people, the world still exists, right?"

"That's because other people are watching my death from the outside. They aren't seeing it from my perspective."

"So if you suddenly died, to you, the world would end. But I'd still be here, so the world wouldn't end for me."

"Yes...yes, but..."

Uchida grew extremely uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I tried to grasp what he was saying.

Uchida had turned red, and his face was sweaty. He thought for a while, then turned to a new page in his notebook and drew a Y-shaped branching line. On one branch he wrote *Alive*, and on the other, he wrote *Dead*.

"For example, let's say I got in a traffic accident here."

"A big accident?"

"A really bad one. Maybe I'll die, and maybe I won't. So this line is the world where I die, and this world is the one where I live."

"So this world is the one we're in right now."

"While I'm alive, all kinds of things can happen to me. I might die, and I might not die. Every time, it's one of those two things, right? And each time, the world splits like this. That means that I, or what I think is me, is always here and goes to the world where I'm alive."

"But in the other world, you've died. If I was in this other world, I'd think you were dead."

"That's true for your world. But in this world, I'm always alive. Every time it branches, I just stay alive, so I only move forward to the world where I live."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm always here, alive, to think about it. In the worlds where I die, I can't think like this. Because the world has already ended."

"But..."

"Maybe I will die in your world. But that's because you're watching my death from the outside. I'm not watching myself. I'm

over here in this world. See?"

Uchida looked at me anxiously.

I felt like I was starting to understand what he was trying to say.

"In other words, even if I see you die, I have no way of knowing if that counts as death to you. I can't prove it does."

"That's right! Exactly!"

I folded my arms, thinking about this. It felt extremely mysterious. I had never thought about anything like it before.

"And that doesn't just work for you; it also works for me."

"I don't think anybody ever actually dies. That's what I meant by that."

"That's an extremely amazing hypothesis."

"When I first thought of it, I was really surprised. But I've been researching it all by myself all this time because I didn't think I could ever explain it to you. But it's just a hypothesis."

"It's a good topic for research."

Uchida smiled happily, like he'd finally set a heavy burden down.



We started walking again, leaving the old town behind.

The highway reappeared. The stream went through a conduit under the highway. Beyond that was a dense forest. We spread out our map at the forest entrance and drew the course of the stream so far. The stream was a long curve starting from where the university faced the highway. The forest in front of us was probably the forest that stretched north and south between our neighborhood and the highway, so we'd never explored it before.

"We still have time before sunset. Let's go as far as we can."

We applied bug spray and went into the forest.

Both sides of the stream were steep slopes covered in tall grass. The stream went through the bottom of a damp, dark valley. Cicada cries echoed all around us, as if trying to crush us.

The forest seemed so deep, I debated turning back, but we came out the other side surprisingly fast. We found ourselves in a broad clearing. There was another forest beyond the clearing. To our left was a long fence, dividing the clearing from a residential area. Beyond that fence were little houses, lined up in rows like they'd been built from LEGOs. This must be the next neighborhood over. To our right was a tall prefab wall. I thought it looked like the Great Wall of China. There was no way we could climb that wall as easily as we could a fence.

We followed the stream straight across the clearing.

Uchida ripped up a stalk of grass, swinging it around. "Is the

source in that forest?"

"I don't know."

"I wonder what the source is?"

"This is just how I imagine it. But say there's a big lake like the Cambrian-period sea, all filled with clear water. And there are all sorts of mysterious things living inside. There's a little laboratory next to the lake, built to observe the lake. That's how I picture it anyway."

"That would be neat."

We were soon through the clearing. The stream ran out of the forest depths ahead.

As we walked through the forest, I kept checking our direction on the compass and comparing it to the map. I was trying to guess where the stream might be coming from. The river was tracing a gentle curve to the right.

"Weird," I said. "This forest is connected to the Jabberwock Woods. It's like this stream flows out of the Jabberwock Woods. Like we're on our way back to the clearing."

As I walked, I looked up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves. The light was turning slowly red. It was almost evening.

I looked at the compass again, and Uchida yelled, "Penguin!"

There was a single penguin on the other side of the stream. No other penguins around it. Seeing a single penguin is a little lonely, like the vending machines at the bus terminal. It seemed fine on its own. Again, like the vending machines. It was just staring straight ahead. Even when we approached, it didn't budge. Like it was lost in thought.

"There, there," we said, passing right in front of the penguin.

We walked a little ways and glanced back. The penguin was still there, standing by the stream, doing nothing in particular.

Then we saw something white and blobby crawl out of the stream in front of the penguin. It was about the size of a rather fat grown-up human. It was shaped somewhat like a small blue whale, but there were bat-like wings growing out of its back. And it had arms and legs like a human's, only much shorter. It walked on all fours. I had spent all day flipping through illustrated animal guides at the library, but I had never seen anything like this before.

Uchida grabbed my clothes, spooked.

A moment later, this pseudo-whale attacked the penguin. The penguin let out a squeak. The whale's mouth yawned open, and it swallowed the penguin whole. Its body swelled up like a someone had pumped helium into it. Its mouth stayed slightly open, and its breath shook the leaves and grass. The creature let out a strange grunt and slithered back into the river.

"Uchida, did you see that?" I said. "What was that thing? It ate the penguin!"

“I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Seeing a penguin just vanish like that made us both highly anxious.

We felt like if we stayed there, a creature like that strange thing would come crawling out of the river again, so our pace grew faster. Moving through the woods, we remembered the rumors floating around town. The large birds on the high-tension towers. The apelike beast on the water-tower hill. The lizard-like thing walking past the meeting hall.

We saw a bright light through the trees ahead.

“We’re almost out of the forest,” Uchida said, cheering up. “Maybe it’s the source!”

Smacking the tree trunks like drums, we ran toward the light. We burst out of the forest, and a blue sky opened up overhead, the sun shining down like in southern climes. A warm breeze blew past, and the grass around us swayed like waves in the ocean. I realized the sound of the cicadas had died away. I couldn’t hear anything but the wind.

“Aoyama, we know this place.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” I said.

The stream we’d been following traced a gentle curve across the grass to our left.

In the clearing across the stream, The Sea floated. It was extremely swollen, and the sunlight reflecting off its surface filled the entire clearing. Walking through the dancing lights reflecting off The Sea felt like we were under the shallows of that Cambrian-period sea.

We sat down on the grass and spread out the map.

“Suzuki said he followed the river downstream from the school, and it brought them to this clearing the day they attacked our observation station.”

“That’s the blue line here,” Uchida said, pointing at the map.

“Meanwhile, we started from the same place Suzuki did and explored the river upstream. It went around the library and the university but ended up in the exact same clearing. So whether you go upstream or down, you get to this clearing. I think that’s completely impossible.”

This really was extremely puzzling.

Uchida and I stood up, not saying anything else, and walked across the clearing.

As we got near the observation station parasol, we saw Hamamoto sitting in a chair. She’d seen us, too, and was looking at us through the binoculars. She raised a hand and called out to us.

We waved back.

“Hamamoto would say we can’t prove it. That it’s not scientific.”

“We’ve observed the light-bending phenomenon on The Sea. We’ve observed the clouds in the sky above this clearing forming strange shapes. And we have a time-travel hypothesis to explain what Suzuki experienced after coming in contact with The Sea. Space and time are distorted around The Sea in ways our common sense can’t predict. So the fact that the stream we followed leads back into itself may be caused by The Sea as well.”

“A new hypothesis.”

“If my hypothesis is correct, this entire clearing shouldn’t exist. Why? Because light bending like that, time operating like that, and rivers flowing like that all work against the laws of our world.”

“What is The Sea? Have you figured it out, Aoyama?”

I turned around and looked at The Sea looming over the clearing.

I remembered what my father had told me in the café on the hill.

The ends of the world were inside the world when it folded in on itself.



I needed to review my notes thoroughly.

Project Amazon was done. It was now a part of our research on The Sea.

Previous discoveries had indicated that research on The Sea was the same as research on the Penguin Highway.

And research on the penguins was research on the lady.

It was all one problem.



The lady called.

“Yo, kiddo. I’m better.”

“I knew you would be better soon.”

“How?”

“I am your researcher. I know more about you than anyone.”

I heard her laughing.

“Wanna put that research on hold and go to the beach? Summer vacation’s almost over.”

“Yes.”

And so we agreed to go to the seaside town.

On the day in question, I woke up earlier than usual. I am already an extremely early riser, but that day, I woke up before the sun rose. I opened my window and took a breath of morning air. I observed the glass-like deep-blue sky, considering whether it was appropriate

weather for my first trip to the ocean. I waited at the windowsill for morning. The sun soon rose, turning the sky from dark navy to a pale blue.

I imagined what morning was like in the seaside town. The house where the lady was born was high up, with a great view. An old house covered in ivy. Her father and mother lived there now. You could always smell the sea on the breeze. There was an old church at the top of the road next to the house.

I went to the bus terminal where we'd agreed to meet. The lady was wearing a big white hat, looking at the bus schedule. "Been too long," she said, grinning. I was glad to see her looking well.

"Thanks for the orange juice and pastries," she said.

"Did they give you nourishment?"

"They did."

"I did an experiment in which I didn't eat anything. Like you."

"Hoo, boy. Why would you do that?"

"It was extremely difficult. I definitely won't do that again."

"Well, naturally." She pointed at my baggage. "What's all that for? You going on an adventure?"

"I have prepared many things. You can never be too prepared."

We got on a city bus and rode it toward the station.

If the train line was built out to our neighborhood as planned, we'd be able to ride it directly to the lady's town without taking the bus or going the long way around. I hoped that day would come soon. But it would still be several years before the new train reached our town. It might not happen until I was a grown-up. I definitely couldn't wait that long.

This was the first time I'd gone anywhere far away with the lady, so I was a little nervous.

"This your first time to the ocean?"

"It is a day to remember."

"Tell me who you know who's nice enough to take you there."

"That would be you. And I'm very grateful."

While the bus swayed, the lady talked about the seaside town. It was all built on the diagonal slope of the mountain, so when it rained, water would rush down the road outside her house like a waterfall. When she'd ridden the train home after dark from her school in the next town over, the lamps on the side of the hill had looked like scattered jewels.

We reached the station, and I bought tickets to our destination, following the lady's instructions. The station was so far away, I had to search to the very end of the railway chart. We sat on a bench on the platform waiting for the train.

"My father's going to France tomorrow."

“Wow, that’s really far.”

“He’s going to be doing major research in France on company business. I’ve never been to any other countries. Have you?”

“I haven’t, no. But France sounds nice. Is he gone long?”

“Three weeks.”

“Then you’ll have to look after the house for him.”

“I’ll do that. I know how to lock up. Once my father leaves tomorrow, I’ll have to make sure I wake up early every morning.”

At last, our train arrived, and we got on.

Outside the windows, the station building and houses and rice paddies flowed by. The sky was blue like the sea. I wondered why both the sky and the sea were blue. I took out my notebook and wrote that down.

If we took the train through the tunnel at the prefecture border, we could go all the way to the seaside town. But as we passed the next station, the lady started looking sick. She leaned against me, breathing heavily. Startled, I looked up, and her eyes were closed, sweat streaming down her face. Her cheeks were as white as a penguin’s belly.

“Are you sick?”

“Just a little dizzy.”

The lady closed her eyes, furrowing her brow.

Listening to her ragged breathing, I remembered another time we’d taken a train and gotten off along the way. I felt like something bad would happen if we stayed on this train.

“Let’s not go to the sea today.”

She looked displeased. “Why? I just need a short rest, and...”

“It’s not good to force yourself. I believe we should cancel it today.”

I pulled the lady off the train at the station before the tunnel. A train going the other way was idling on the other side of the empty platform. “We don’t need to go back,” she said, but I pulled her right across and onto the other train.

And we went home, watching all the same scenery flowing the other way.

We got off at the station in town, and while we were on the bus, the lady didn’t say much. Neither did I.

We got back to the bus terminal around eleven.

The bus did a U-turn to go back to the station, and then the terminal was empty. The lady sat on the bench in the waiting room, resting. I sat next to her drinking tea from a thermos. I offered her some cold tea, but the lady shook her head. I’d never seen her look this bad before. It was extremely hot in the waiting room, and my sweat flowed like water.

Eventually, the lady stood up. She staggered and grabbed my shoulder for support. I stood my ground, trying to keep her from falling. "I was feeling great this morning," she said. "Sorry we couldn't go."

"It's fine."

"You're a real gentleman. But kids are allowed to be more self-serving."

"I'm not a kid."

"You are so!" she said, grinning weakly. "Let's try again tomorrow."

"I think we should wait a little longer."

The lady bought a can of Coke from the vending machine and held it to her forehead. Then she stood staring absently up at the blue sky like the penguin in the clearing.

"Summer vacation's ending, right?"

"No matter how fun something is, it always has an end."

"Truth."

And with that, she started walking away.

I hurried after her, providing support.

The asphalt was hot enough to fry an egg on. Our shadows were jet-black.

When we reached the middle of the terminal, she let go of my shoulder and crouched down. I crouched down, too, rubbing her back. Her body was as cold as the asphalt was hot. Cold like ice. There were drops of sweat on her pale, smooth forehead.

Her face down, she groaned aloud.

A drop of sweat fell from the lady's brow, gleaming on the asphalt. The sweat drop stood on the surface of the asphalt like a marble. As I stared, the sweat drop slowly began to move. But that was just an illusion—in actuality, the asphalt the sweat drop was sitting on was moving.

My hand on the lady's back, I looked up.

All around us, the terminal asphalt was moving like soft clay—a whirlpool centered on us. It made no sound at all. The speed of the flow created several different rings, like a Baumkuchen cake. In time, these different layers started rising and falling, like waves. The soft, smoothly flowing asphalt was gleaming like it was wet. It felt like we were in a caramel factory.

All manner of things began peeking out between the waves of melted asphalt. Some looked like human hands and feet, others like gaping fish gills, complicated branching antlers, or large sets of wings. They joined together, came apart, rising to the surface of the asphalt and sinking again. It felt like something was trying to crawl out of the asphalt, but it couldn't decide on the form to take.

Part of the asphalt rose up, looking like the back of a small whale. Several more appeared, swimming in circles around the lady and me. Horns grew on their backs, wings sprouted, arms and legs popped out.

Her voice hoarse, the lady whispered, "Jabberwock."

All I could do was observe this sinister phenomenon.

I don't know how long it took, but eventually, the phenomenon subsided, and the asphalt went back to normal. Leaving almost no trace of any of this activity behind.

"What's wrong with me?" she whispered. She covered her face with both hands. "So many weird things. In the middle of the night, creatures race out of my apartment into the forest. Wet, pattering feet crawling on four legs. They're so scary."

"Jabberwocks?"

"I dunno. I'm always asleep. I just hear them leaving."

"You're making the Jabberwocks."

"Unconsciously. What does that mean, kiddo?"

I couldn't begin to say.



The morning my father set out for France, the town was blanketed by an extremely thick fog.

I walked with him to the bus terminal to see him off. He had a new suitcase he'd bought at the mall. My sister was still asleep, so my mother stayed home.

The fog made us both wet, and the morning air was cold, like autumn was already here. As we walked down the bus route, the asphalt in the distance vanished into the fog. The trees along the road and the houses and the grass in the vacant lots and the vending machines were all buried in fog. The sunlight filtering through the fog gave everything a golden glow.

"How long does it take to get to France?"

"I'll be on the plane for more than ten hours."

"I want to go to France someday."

"What presents should I bring back?"

"I'd like a notebook. A foreign notebook like Hamamoto uses."

"Well, I'll make sure to buy one, then."

We walked on through the fog. Despite the suitcase, my father walked very quickly. It was so heavy, I couldn't even lift it. My father was extremely strong.

"Is your research going well?" he asked.

I thought about it. "I know that all the problems are actually one big problem."

"I'm going to be gone for three weeks. If you have any questions

for me, you'd better ask them now."

"I don't know what I should ask."

"Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good."

"I know everything is connected, but I don't understand how they're connected. Everything is extremely complicated, and I can't form a hypothesis."

"Take a big piece of paper and write down everything you think is connected. Everything that baffles you, all the little discoveries you've made. Everything important on one piece of paper. And write it all down in the smallest letters you can."

"Why the smallest?"

"So you can see everything important in a single glance. You'll want to look everything over again and again. Asking yourself which notes are related to which, playing with different structures in your head. Keep thinking. When you're eating, when you're walking; make it so your notes all go flying around in your head whenever you need them. And get plenty of sleep every day."

"And that'll help me figure it out?"

"At some point, all sorts of things will suddenly fit together. One note will connect to another note, and then those will pull in yet another note. Then...eureka."

"But what if I still don't understand?"

"Then go have fun until you do. Sometimes you just need to stop and play."

"Then I'll try that."

We reached the bus terminal.

In the fog, the terminal seemed extremely sad. It was hard to make out either the stop itself or the waiting room. I could barely see the trees behind the terminal at all. The road running past had so much fog on it, I was worried that the bus would never come at all.

As we waited for the bus, a figure came toward us through the fog. Strolling casually, like she was just out for a walk. "It's the lady," I said, surprised.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning. Out for a walk?" my father asked.

"That and seeing you off. Aoyama told me all about his father's trip to France yesterday. Make sure you look after things while he's gone, Aoyama."

"I will."

My father took a closer look at her. "You're looking better," he said. "I was definitely worried after seeing you in the café the other day."

"Unfortunately, yesterday I tried to take Aoyama to the ocean and got too tired on the way."

"Well, if he's ever asking too much..."

"I never ask too much!"

"My son does get a little too absorbed in his research."

"It doesn't bother me," she said. "Does he worry you sometimes?"

"I'm always worried about him. But at this point, it's just the way he is, so I can't really count it among my top concerns. By the way, it seems like he's grappling with a pretty major problem these days."

"I know."

"But some problems are better left unsolved."

"Really?"

"If the problem he's tackling turns out to be one of those, it could prove extremely harmful. That's what worries me most."

My father was speaking in riddles.

We heard an engine noise, and the lady turned around.

A large shuttle bus was slowly approaching down the foggy road. It felt very strange that a bus to the airport came all the way to the stop at the edge of our town. I thought it would be wonderful to someday get on a bus like this that would take me on a journey to outer space.

The driver got out and helped my father stow his suitcase in the undercarriage.

"I'm off!" my father said. He put his hand on my head.

"See you soon," I said.

When the bus drove away, the lady and I walked away through the fog. "It's like the whole town is the ends of the earth," she said. Then she saw me fiddling with my loose tooth. "Want me to yank that for you?" she asked.

"I'm fine. I'll get it out myself."

We'd had a very similar conversation once before. It was recorded accurately in my notebook. That was back in May, when the penguins were first appearing, and I first started studying the Penguin Highway. One hundred and thirteen days had passed since then. An extremely large number of things had happened, so I felt as if I had experienced much more than 113 days' worth of growth.

"Kiddo, you still can't solve the mystery?"

"It will take a little longer."

"Well, I'm waiting."

We split up in front of my house.

The lady walked quickly off into the fog. I fiddled with my tooth, watching her go. Just after she vanished from view, she said something. "What?" I called after her, but she just kept walking. I don't know what she said.

I stood surrounded by thick fog, wiggling my tooth. Suddenly, it came out, and the taste of blood filled my mouth.

I put the tooth on my palm and made observations, then went inside.



Summer vacation ended, the new semester began, and immediately, school was plunged into chaos.

Why? Because Suzuki had captured a strange creature nobody had ever seen before and brought it to school with him. Kids from other classes kept coming to see it; packs of kids both older and younger all lined up for viewings. Even the teachers came by to look.

The teachers examined the creature carefully, but no matter how you looked at it, it was clearly real. "That's an amazing discovery," one of them said. Other teachers were creeped out and ran away.

Emperor Suzuki lorded it over everyone.

He put the tank with the creature in it at the back of the classroom, showing it to anyone who came by. There was a constant ring of children around the case. Suzuki put a cloth over the tank, saying he didn't want to scare it, and only showed a piece of it at a time. He told anyone who would listen the story of how he'd captured it on the athletic field.

We lined up to see it, too, but when it was our turn, he quickly covered the tank and said, "Not you. This is our research."

"Everyone else is looking," Hamamoto said. "Why not us?"

"You wouldn't share your research, would you? That's why."

I had to admit Suzuki's argument was logically sound.

The commotion got bad enough that the teacher carried Suzuki's tank to the faculty office. Even after the tank was gone, kids kept coming to see it and leaving disappointed. Suzuki sulked a bit, since he couldn't brag about it anymore, but the teacher said, "We'll have some researchers take a look at your discovery later," so he got all proud again and bragged about that instead.

"The teachers said it would be better to have important researchers investigate the creature," Uchida reported. "If it really is a new species, they'll announce it in the journals."

Based on stories collected from kids allowed to see the creature, I drew a speculative diagram in my notebook. It was about the size of a cat. Shaped like a whale, with a smooth, wet exterior. It had strange arms and legs. Like human arms and legs, only shorter. It had bat-like wings on its back. It sounded exactly like the creature Uchida and I had seen swallow a penguin in the forest, only much smaller.

Hamamoto took a look at my sketch. "Do you think the lady made this?" she asked.

"It's a Jabberwock," I whispered. "The lady definitely made it."

News that Suzuki had captured a mysterious creature spread rapidly through our neighborhood. By the time I got home from school, even my mother knew.

"I hear Suzuki discovered an unusual creature," she said as we ate our snacks.

"He did. He brought it to school today and caused extreme chaos."

"What was it like?"

I showed my mother the sketch and explained it to her. She frowned.

"Oh dear. That is one sinister creature. I wonder if this is what was spotted wandering around the meeting hall."

"I don't know."

"First the penguins and now these. I don't get why people abandon their pets like that."

Clearly, my mother didn't think this was an unknown species that couldn't be found in any illustrated guide. My mother hadn't read those guides from cover to cover the way I had.

I spent the entire day with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, one that left me unable to relax at all. I was usually very calm, so this was a new sensation. Hamamoto called, and we went out to the observation station. I called Uchida, too.

We met at the water-tower hill and cut through the Jabberwock Woods.

When we reached the clearing, we were so surprised, we stopped in our tracks. The Sea was unbelievably swollen, to the point where nearly half the clearing was covered by The Sea. If it kept expanding at the current rate, in a few more days, our observation station would be inside it.

We held an emergency meeting.

"The Sea was waxing steadily," Hamamoto said, showing her notes. "Why did it suddenly get this big?"

"I think because there aren't any penguins. Have you seen any in the clearing lately?"

"Come to think of it, no."

"It's because the Jabberwocks eat the penguins," Uchida said. "I don't like them."

"Is the creature you two saw really the same thing Suzuki's group captured?"

"The size is different, but I think they're both Jabberwocks."

"Suzuki boasting so much about his discovery really got him a lot of attention. And now The Sea is suddenly huge. I'm sure the grown-ups will come and find out about our research."

"The fact that our secret hasn't already been discovered is just good luck. We'll have to prepare ourselves to turn our research on The

Sea over to other people. It's very sad, but we should provide them with all our experiment data. That will help the larger research project proceed."

"Do you think they'll listen to us?"

"I don't know. It's so mysterious."

"Aoyama, you said all the research was one thing, right?"

"I've claimed that, yes."

"Then we'll have to tell them about her, too. It's the penguins that can destroy The Sea, and she's the one that makes the penguins. Are you okay with that, Aoyama?"

I couldn't answer.

What should we do?

Suddenly, Hamamoto turned around, scowling at the forest. Glaring at the shadows of the trees. "Is that Suzuki?" she said sharply.

"I don't see anything," Uchida said.

"Just your imagination?" I suggested, but I wasn't at all sure. It seemed highly likely that Suzuki would be so excited by his success capturing the creature that he'd come here to research The Sea next.

Worried about the future of our research projects, we left the forest.

The next day, the chaos was even worse.

The creature Suzuki had captured was secured under lock and key at the back of the faculty office, and no students were allowed to see it. Only Suzuki and his minions were granted special permission to go in. After school, a university professor came and listened to their story. There were rumors a TV crew was going to come, too.

After meeting with the professor, Suzuki left the faculty room and was immediately surrounded.

"What did they ask?" But Suzuki just grinned. "Top secret," he said. "If I blab about it, it could cause all sorts of problems."

As he tried to leave, we nabbed Suzuki in the hall.

"Suzuki, what did you tell that professor?"

"Top secret. Can't breathe a word."

Hamamoto grabbed a fistful of his shirt.

"You didn't tell him about our research, did you?"

Suzuki tried to look cool, but when Hamamoto fixed her big eyes on his, he avoided her gaze. "Only our discovery," he mumbled. "Nothing else."

Then he brushed her hand away and ran off down the hall.

"I don't like it," Hamamoto muttered.



TV and newspaper reporters actually did come. They took pictures of

Suzuki and the weird creature together and did interviews with him. Stories about the penguins from the spring were brought up again. Our town was suddenly in the limelight as the place where weird creatures appeared.

At lunch, the teacher turned on the TV and showed us the interview with Suzuki. That was the first time we saw the creature he'd captured. It was much squatter and smaller than the one we'd seen in the woods—even a little cuter. Maybe it was a baby Jabberwock. The Jabberwock was on all fours in the tank, sitting perfectly still.

After school, the teacher stood in front of the class, explaining, "Starting today, there'll be a university team investigating the woods behind the athletic field. They'll be using the athletic field as their base, so you won't be able to use it for a while. Make sure you don't get in their way."

I raised my hand. "Why are they going into the woods?"

"To investigate the ecology and climate. I'm not surprised you're interested, Aoyama."

"Is this related to the creature Suzuki found?"

"I don't know all the details, but I'd imagine so."

"When the investigation is over, will we be allowed in the forest again?"

"You were never allowed in that forest," the teacher said sternly. "Even when the investigation is done, don't ever go in there."

Hamamoto looked at me, scared.

Our fears had come to pass.

As soon as school was over, the three of us left in a hurry. We didn't even want to take the time to go home first. We headed straight to the water-tower hill.

"Do you think they've already found The Sea?" Hamamoto asked.

"I think they've almost certainly found it. If this was just an investigation into a new creature, there's no way a whole investigation team would be here this fast. I'm sure they've found The Sea. And decided 'This is too weird and must be dangerous.' That's why they've acted so swiftly."

We headed toward the hill, feeling anxious. The closer we got to the forest, the more aware we became of the stir running through the town. There were women standing on corners, gossiping about it.

At last, we reached the water-tower hill, but there was yellow tape across the stairs at the bottom, with signs saying UNDER INVESTIGATION and NO TRESPASSING hanging from it. When we tried to go under the tape, a young man with glasses came running down the stairs, waving us off.

"We have business in the forest," I said.

“It’s under investigation, so we can’t let in any outsiders.”

With him watching from the stairs, we couldn’t get into the forest.

Thinking we might be able to get into the forest from a different direction, we circled the hill and cut through the residential area, heading toward the athletic field. As we neared the fields, everything got even more imposing. There were a number of white tents in the parking lot and lots of people scowling at monitors, fiddling with instruments, or drawing things on whiteboards and arguing about them. We could hear generators running.

Hamamoto peered into the parking lot and then called out, “Dad!”

Hamamoto started walking toward one of the tents, so Uchida and I followed her. Professor Hamamoto was with a few others, glaring at the monitor, but he stood up when he saw Hamamoto coming. He scratched his big bearlike face. There was a ballpoint pen behind one ear and a worn-out notebook in one hand.

“What are you doing here?”

“Dad, what are you researching?”

“We’re observing a very strange phenomenon discovered in the depths of the woods. I’ve been abruptly called in to help.”

“What sort of phenomenon?” I asked.

The professor hesitated. “I can’t tell you. It’s under investigation.”

“We’d like to get in the forest.”

“Not until we’ve finished investigating and are sure it’s safe. Now, you run along home. Don’t want you bothering anyone.”

Hamamoto wanted to keep bugging him, but Uchida and I grabbed her hands and pulled her away. No matter how much we talked with him, he was never going to let us in the forest, and it would never do for him to get suspicious. Hamamoto sulked about it but started to follow us.

Then she saw Suzuki and his minions sitting in a tent at the back of the parking lot.

“Why is Suzuki here?”

“Suzuki’s cooperating with the investigation,” Professor Hamamoto said. “They’re the ones who told us about the phenomenon in the forest. That’s what prompted this emergency investigation. They know a lot about this forest, so we need to hear from them.”

At that, Hamamoto shook off Uchida and me. Her chestnut hair streaming behind her, she took off like a rocket. “Wait!” Professor Hamamoto yelled. He tried to catch her, but he moved like a bear waking up from hibernating, and she easily slipped past him.

“Catch her!” he yelled.

Other investigators tried to nab Hamamoto, but she dodged between all of them and reached Suzuki a moment later.

Suzuki and his minions stood up, surprised.

Hamamoto hauled back her arm and slapped Suzuki across the cheek. There was a sound like a balloon popping. I think Suzuki must have been so surprised, he didn't even try to protect himself. If I'd been in his position, I'm sure I'd have just stood there stunned as well. The other investigators and Kobayashi and Nagasaki were all surprised, too. "I'll never forgive you!" she yelled, so loud that everyone in the parking lot heard. Suzuki's face twisted like he was about to burst into tears.

"Why?" Suzuki wailed. "Why?"

Professor Hamamoto caught up and pulled her away, and she just kept yelling, "I'll never forgive you!"

In all my life, I had never seen a girl get that angry.



Chased away from the athletic field, we held an emergency meeting at my house.

Hamamoto was leaning against the wall, silently making walls out of blue LEGOs. She was furious that her father had scolded her and sent her away. Even the sweets my mother prepared us didn't cheer her up.

I thought odds were high the investigation team had already found The Sea. The "strange phenomenon" the professor referred to was likely The Sea. The investigation team was starting to research The Sea using all the most modern observation instruments. I thought it was a real shame we couldn't participate in that research.

"What are you going to do, Aoyama?"

"We've been studying The Sea all this time. I think we should turn over our important discoveries to the investigation team. But the lady is at the center of our research. We can't tell the research team about her. That leaves us with a dilemma."

"A dilemma?"

I looked over at Hamamoto. She was focused on her blue walls.

"I think we have to call a halt to our research. And forget all about it. We can't show the results of that research or the records we've made in our notebooks to anybody. We have to forget about the connections between The Sea and the penguins, and the penguins and the lady, forget everything we've brought to light."

"And you're just fine with that?" Hamamoto said.

"I have a lot of research projects. I'll just research something else."

"I think we should continue observing The Sea."

"But the forest is off-limits."

"Show me the exploration map."

I took out the map and spread it out on the floor. Hamamoto

leaned over the map, studying it intently. She pointed at the final route Uchida and I had followed for Project Amazon.

“There are a number of routes into the Jabberwock Woods. If we can’t get there from the water-tower hill, we just have to go in from the other side. You followed this path in from the side of the highway, so I don’t think the investigation team will have closed that off.”

I nodded. “Makes sense. There’s no way they could be watching the whole forest.”

Hamamoto took a deep breath and stood up.

“Let’s go.”

“Now?”

“I’m angry. This is *our* research project!”

We hastily got ready. It was already getting rather late, so just in case the sun set while we were within the forest, I got a big flashlight from the closet under the stairs and put that in my rucksack.

Then we left the house.

For Project Amazon, we’d followed the flow of the stream, which forced us to walk through the university campus and the old houses. On the map, this was a very roundabout route. If we followed the overgrown hiking path from the bus terminal, we could reach the highway much faster, and if we followed the highway, it wasn’t that far to the point where Uchida and I had entered the forest.

We reached the highway and followed the asphalt road. The trucks whizzing past us kicked up clouds of dust. The forest grew right up to the edge of the highway, so it was rather dark. The sidewalk was narrow, and the wind from the trucks felt like it was trying to knock us over. Each time a truck went past, Hamamoto clapped her hands over her ears. When there were no cars, we could hear the Walker’s cicadas singing their distinctive song in the woods. When we reached the conduit under the highway, we turned off into the forest, following the stream.

Inside the woods it was wet and so dark it felt like it was already evening. In the overgrown valley, the noise of the water flowing through the stream seemed extremely loud. When we got through the forest and emerged into the grassy area, there were dragonflies everywhere. The sky to the east was starting to darken, and the sky to the west was turning orange. Lights were on in the windows of the houses in the residential area to the left. Beyond this field was the Jabberwock Woods, and it looked like it was filled with massive black creatures.

We turned on the flashlight and stepped into the darkened forest.

Just as Hamamoto planned it, we slipped right through the investigation team’s security and made it to the clearing. When we stepped out of the forest, all three of us stopped in our tracks,

surprised.

The Sea filled the entire clearing. It was so big, it would be difficult to measure the exact size.

The lower half of The Sea was now buried in the ground, leaving only the top half rising out of the clearing like a giant breast. We worked our way around the outside of it, looking up. The evening sun hit the top of The Sea's dome, turning just that section of it red.

"It's still waxing," Hamamoto said, staring up at it. "This is the biggest it's ever been."

"If it keeps expanding, our entire town will be inside The Sea," I said.

Then Uchida grabbed my arm.

"Aoyama! There's something here!"

We turned, and across the clearing, around the observation station, we saw a number of black silhouettes. They were on all fours, their sleek bodies bent over. Like statues, the silhouettes weren't moving at all. "Hamamoto," I whispered. We ducked down low, hiding in the grass. "Investigators? Penguins?" Hamamoto whispered.

"Neither. Those are Jabberwocks."

"The thing Suzuki captured? These are much bigger."

"And there are a lot of them."

We stifled our breaths for a while, but the Jabberwocks never moved. Just as we were considering going forward, we saw something stirring at the border between the clearing and the forest. A penguin, waddling along. No other penguins with it. It ran hastily across the clearing, flippers flapping, and stopped right in front of us. It seemed tired.

Then a number of Jabberwocks came out of the forest, following the penguin's path. The way they walked was very clumsy-looking. Human arms and legs were just awkwardly jammed onto the sides of a blue whale's body, so it looked like they had to work really hard to move at all. "Gross," Hamamoto said.

"The penguin's in danger."

The pack of Jabberwocks was sliding across the grass, following the penguin. The penguin was seemingly too worn out to notice the monsters creeping up behind it.

Uchida started running.

It was so sudden, neither Hamamoto nor I were able to follow.

He ran across the grass and picked up the penguin. As he did, the Jabberwocks picked up speed, dashing across the grass right toward Uchida. Uchida ran in the other direction, clutching the penguin in his arms.

Hamamoto and I got up and ran after him.

The Jabberwocks occupying the observation station noticed us.

The hitherto immobile silhouettes all turned toward us and started running forward on all fours. Before Hamamoto and I could catch up with him, Uchida was tackled sideways by a Jabberwock. The penguin was flung away and went rolling across the grass. I tried to save the penguin, but a Jabberwock got there first.

The penguin was swiftly swallowed up. The Jabberwock's torso swelled up like someone had added helium. The wind from its mouth shook the grass.

"Ah!" Uchida yelled. "You ate it!"

Uchida tackled the Jabberwock. Then another Jabberwock threw itself onto the pile. I shoved it off Uchida.

Hamamoto turned the flashlight on, lighting up the Jabberwocks. We heard a noise like a bunch of crying babies, and the Jabberwocks scattered across the grass, avoiding Hamamoto's flashlight beam.

"They don't like the light! This way!"

Hamamoto pointed toward the observation station. I grabbed Uchida's arm, and we ran toward Hamamoto.

At the observation station, Hamamoto opened her notebook and quickly took measurements on The Sea.

One side of it was right in front of us. If it waxed a little larger, it would swallow up the observation station. Its sides had a cold, silvery gleam, like it was made of steel. And there were a dozen Jabberwocks standing on all fours between us and The Sea. It seemed like they'd forgotten us. They were all looking up, gazing into the distance, not moving at all—like shadow puppets. Looking at them, I remembered how the penguins had stood in this same clearing, staring up at the sky. It was like both the penguins and the Jabberwocks were alien life-forms that had come here from another planet and were lost on Earth.

"What are the Jabberwocks?" I murmured.

Just then, we heard grown-ups yelling. Powerful beams of light came out of the forest behind us, like searchlights illuminating the side of The Sea. The Jabberwocks scattered. We turned toward the forest and were caught in the lights, unable to see a thing.

"The kids are here!" someone called. The investigation team.

And that's how our research on The Sea ended.

We were taken back to the base at the athletic field, and all the adults there were mad at us. Professor Hamamoto, bathed in the bright lights inside the tent, was the scariest. He didn't give us a long lecture like the teachers at school did. He just asked, "How'd you get in the forest?" We admitted we'd gone in from the other side of the woods, and he nodded. "You can't do that again. Understand?"

"But...", Hamamoto began.

"You can't do that again!" he shouted, his voice like a thunderclap.

It was so loud, we all jumped off our seats.

Even Hamamoto didn't say anything more.

Still, I thought we should at least explain the dangers of The Sea to Professor Hamamoto. I tried to detail how we'd sent a probe inside The Sea only to have it vanish, but he didn't give me the time.

"Aoyama, this isn't something you need to worry about," he said.

We were left sitting under the tent. Hamamoto stared at the ground, not saying a word. Uchida cried a little. Someone from the team came and gave him a handkerchief.

At last, our parents arrived, and we were escorted home.



The next morning, I tried to go to school, but I was too worn out to move. My whole body felt heavy, like it wasn't even mine. My mother noticed I wasn't getting up and came to check on me. She put her hand on my head.

"You've got a fever," she said. "Punishment for doing something so dangerous. You'd better stay in bed today."

"I'm so busy, though."

"None of that, now."

She brought me a cup of soup and some yogurt with apples in it.

I spent the whole day in bed. After my sister left for school, I heard my mother run the washer and dryer and the vacuum cleaner. Bright light shone through my blinds. I was always extremely busy, so it was rare for me to be in bed when it was this bright out. It felt very odd.

I remembered the advice my father had given me before he set out on his trip and put a large piece of paper next to my pillow, writing notes that summarized all the research results so far.

- ☐ The lady makes penguins.
- ☐ The penguins live on Penguin Energy.
- ☐ Penguins evaporate if they ride the train.
- ☐ The lady wants to make penguins if she's feeling good.
- ☐ If the lady makes too many penguins, she gets sick.
- ☐ If the lady makes Jabberwocks, she gets better.
- ☐ The penguins break The Sea.
- ☐ Jabberwocks eat the penguins.
- ☐ The Sea is linked to the lady's health.
- ☐ The Sea bends space and time.

I was lying on my stomach in bed, glaring at the list. I read it over

and over, then let the notes roll around and around in my head. How did they all connect? How could I tie them all together? No eureka moment arrived.

Before lunch, my mother came up. “Hey!” she said. “If you don’t get some rest, you won’t get better.”

And she took my notebook and the paper away.

I was a child made of steel. The last time I’d had a fever was in December of the previous year. I’d made a record of my suffering in my notebook, yet, once again, I was surprised by how awful this was. I’d been running around just fine the day before, but now I was so tired, I didn’t even want to move. It was upsetting to not know what was happening inside your own body.

My mother made udon for lunch, and we ate together in my room. There was an egg in the udon. I was in the fourth grade, but eating this with her made me feel like I’d gone back to being a baby who didn’t know how to read books or write notes yet.

She went out shopping, and I got the pocket-size notebook and a pen from my desk. I kept it under my pillow where she wouldn’t find it. Now I could finally relax again. Mother didn’t understand that I just didn’t feel comfortable without a notebook next to me.



I stared up at the ceiling, all lit up from the light coming through the blinds, thinking about what Hamamoto and Uchida and Suzuki must be doing. Was the investigation team getting anywhere with their investigation on The Sea? I knew for a fact that all sorts of things were happening outside my house, but I was just lying in bed, far away from all of them. It was so quiet here, it was like being inside a cumulonimbus. And I was worried about the lady. She let her guard down a lot, so I believed I had to save her, or she’d be caught by the investigation team.

After a while, I nodded off.

At first, I kept having a very short dream in which I was sliding down a really, really long pole. For some reason, I was convinced this pole was a space elevator.

Before I knew it, I was an astronaut.

The spaceship I piloted was just like the water-tower tank on the hill. It was spinning to create gravity inside the ship. I was the only person on board. I’d come a very long way and had arrived at a strange new star.

I landed my water-tank spaceship next to a hill like a giant green breast and set out to explore the unknown world. The sky was blue like Earth’s summer. It even had cumulonimbus clouds. From the top

of the breast-shaped hill, I noticed vacant lots stretching as far as the eye could see, all separated from one another with concrete blocks like graph paper.

There was a row of high-tension towers, so I followed the power lines.

There were sometimes vending machines in the vacant lots, and penguins were clustered around them.

It seemed like the only thing living on this planet was penguins. To them, I was an alien who had suddenly landed here. I said "Hello!" but the penguins did not seem at all surprised. There were just standing in the vacant lots, looking up at the sky or lying down on their bellies.

I walked a long way. The neat rows of well-mowed vacant lots began to thin, replaced with tall grassy plains. At last, I reached a deserted shore. The row of high-tension towers ended there. The sky was blue, but the color of the ocean was extremely cold. At the edge of the horizon, I could see the lights of a shopping mall.

I walked along the empty beach and found a large blue whale washed up. I didn't know if it was alive or dead. I looked up at it, and the blue whale said, "How do you do?" It didn't seem uncomfortable. It was rather laid-back, really. I felt like I'd heard its voice before.

I knew then that this blue whale was actually a Jabberwock.

I sat down on the beach, gazing at the ocean.

"Welcome back," the lady said, sitting down next to me.

"Why are you here?"

"I've been here. I mean, this is Earth."

"I felt like I'd gone a long way."

"If you go far enough away, you wind up back where you started."

The lady pointed at the sea in front of us.

"This is the Cambrian-period sea, kiddo."

"I thought the Cambrian period disappeared a long time ago."

"If you go far enough back in time, you wind up back where you started."

Some penguins came waddling up the beach. They stopped and stared out at the horizon, not moving a muscle.

The blue whale was muttering something.

"Jabberwock, what are you saying?"

"God makes mistakes sometimes," the blue whale said. "It's only natural."

"That's unacceptable," the lady said.

"All the penguins would agree with me."

"Well, I'm not a penguin."

"The sea is coming! The sea is coming!" the blue whale said cryptically.

Darkness was falling out across the water. I couldn't see the lights of the mall anymore, and dark clouds were gathering. Purple lightning flashed like fireworks in the distance. I was usually scared of lightning, but for some reason, I was totally fine this time.

It occurred to me that if this was Earth, then everything here had disappeared. My father and mother and sister and Hamamoto and Uchida and Suzuki and his minions and Seaside Café and the dentist and the school, too. While I was away on my long journey, they'd all disappeared. I felt like I'd done something I could never undo. I was a child who never cried, but there were tears on my cheeks.

"Why are you crying, kiddo?"

"I don't know."

"...Sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"Sorry."

Every time she apologized, I felt even more miserable.

"You poor thing. It must be rough."

I heard a voice from somewhere and felt a cold hand on my brow. It felt extremely nice. I opened my eyes, and the lady was sitting on a chair next to my bed, peering into my face. Both her cheeks and her breasts were back to normal. She looked healthy. My room was dimly lit. I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. My head was spinning. I had tears in the corners of my eyes, and the lady's face was blurry.

"I'm feeling great, and you're down for the count. Not often the way of things."

"I have a fever."

"I'm well aware."

"I had a dream. You were in it."

The lady smiled, patting my head.

"I thought about trying to call you. The university investigation team is in the woods."

"I know."

"So you'd better not make any penguins. It would be extremely bad if they found out."

"That's right. I won't make any until you're better. When will you get better?"

"I'm strong, so I'll be better soon."

"Make sure you get nourishment. Humans need energy."

"You get some, too."

The lady thought for a moment. "Kiddo," she whispered. "You did an experiment where you didn't eat, right? I did the same thing."

"You shouldn't do that experiment. Your breasts will get smaller."

She laughed. "I do experiments sometimes, too."

"Was it hard?"

“It wasn’t hard. I didn’t eat anything until today.”
The fever was preventing me from thinking straight.
“Penguin Energy,” she said.
“That’s for penguins. It’s not for humans.”
She looked me right in the eye.
“I’m not human.”
“You aren’t human?”
“I made the penguins, but who made me?”
“My brain isn’t working. Because I have a fever.”
“Sorry.”

She knelt down by the bed and put her cold forehead against mine. Why was she apologizing? The tears I’d shed in my dream ran down from the corners of my eyes onto my cheeks.

“Don’t cry, kiddo,” she said.
“I’m not crying,” I said.



In the morning, I woke up. I was lying in bed, looking at the sky through the gaps in the blinds. There were little clouds scattered everywhere. I opened the window, and a brisk wind blew through the room, like fall was here. My fever was totally gone, and my head felt clear, like the blue sky after the rain clouds blow away.

I ate breakfast in the living room downstairs. I was extremely hungry. I felt much better.

While I was sleeping, my father had called long distance from France. My mother said when he heard I was in bed with a fever he’d been worried and said to make sure I talked to him the next time he called.

“Did anyone come see me while I was sick?”
“The lady from the dentist came by. Do you remember that?”
“I remember that. I thought it was a dream.”

As I walked to school through the morning chill, I suddenly started feeling sad. At first, I didn’t know why I felt that way. As I thought about why I was sad, I remembered the conversation with the lady, the one I’d thought was a dream.

I took my little notebook out of my pocket. I’d practiced taking notes enough that there was a strong possibility I’d written a few even though I was feeling really out of it. The letters were definitely hard to make out, but I read everything I’d written down on those grid-lined pages. The dream about exploring another planet. Everything the lady had said. I read through it all as I walked.

As I passed the dentist, I reached the lot where the penguins had first appeared. A brisk wind blew by, and the grass in the lot—there

were no penguins today—swayed. Then, out of nowhere, everything I'd just read and all the fragments of notes I'd written up till now came flying into my head, all slotting together like I was making a beautiful blue wall out of LEGOs. I didn't have to do anything. I just stood there and watched as they put themselves together.

Before I knew it, the blue wall was complete.

I stopped in my tracks next to the vacant lot. I had a strange numb feeling in the back of my mind. I couldn't think about anything else. My sister turned back, calling my name, but I didn't answer. She just kept following the other children.

I was left alone by the vacant lot.

"Eureka," I whispered.



My head was full of that morning's eureka, and I paid very little attention that day. I had my notebook out and was busy writing hypotheses down. It seemed like Hamamoto wanted to talk about our research on The Sea, but my responses were so absentminded, she made a face and went back to her seat.

"Aoyama, you're being weird," Uchida said.

"Am I?"

"You aren't talking at all. You're just staring at nothing. Are you sure you don't still have a fever?"

"Maybe I do."

Even during classes, I just stared out the window, watching the clouds float by, thinking about the lady.

Suzuki was extremely quiet all day. He'd been bragging about the new species he'd discovered every break since summer vacation ended, but today he didn't say a single word about it. He kept glancing at Hamamoto, but she refused to look at him at all.

After school, he came over to my desk.

"Hamamoto said she'd never forgive me," he said. "I didn't mean to tell them so much."

"But you did."

"They kept asking things. Some were acting like I was lying, and I got mad, and while I was talking about one thing or another, I ended up saying everything. I didn't mean to tell them about your research..."

"What research?"

"Your research. The weird thing in the forest."

"We don't know anything. We weren't researching that."

"Don't lie!" Suzuki said, baffled. "Why would you say that?"

"Suzuki. We've decided to forget everything. Our research is over."

The investigation squad will research everything properly.”

“Are you mad?”

“I never get mad. But that may not be true for Hamamoto.”

“Is it my fault?”

“I hate to break it to you, but it is.”

“Please, say something to Hamamoto for me. Tell her I really didn’t mean to.”

While Suzuki was still clinging to my desk, the loudspeaker came on, and the principal’s voice made an announcement.

“Everyone, there’s been an accident nearby. Do not leave the school until the teachers tell you to. It’s safe inside. I repeat. Until the teachers give the go-ahead, you are not allowed to leave the school grounds. Stay safe inside the school.”

The broadcast ended.

Suzuki frowned. “What kind of accident?” he muttered.

There was a brief silence around us, but it was gradually replaced with a rising commotion.

“Everyone, sit down,” the teacher said. “Quiet!”

The teacher from the class next door came over and talked to our teacher at the door. They both looked worried. I watched the teachers’ lips closely but couldn’t tell what they were saying. I took my eyes off them, looking around the room, and my eyes met Hamamoto’s. She was looking right at me, her face really pale. I gave her a questioning look. She stood up and walked over to the teachers. The noise in the class died down. Everyone gulped.

The teachers looked like they weren’t sure how to answer Hamamoto’s questions.

Suzuki was watching her, too. Uchida looked at me, mouthing “What?” I mouthed “I don’t know” back.

Hamamoto went back to her seat, looking even worse. She buried her face in her hands, sitting perfectly still. I stood up and went over to her. “What is it?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. But there was an accident with the investigation team. Five people are missing.”

“Missing?”

“My father’s missing, too.”

“How do you know? Did the teachers tell you?”

“They didn’t say. But I can tell from their expressions.”

“The Sea?”

“What else?”

She looked up. Her eyes were wet. “Are you really giving up on researching The Sea? What can we do? How much have you figured out?”

I thought for a moment.

"All I know is what we should do."

"And we're going to do that?"

"Aoyama, sit down," the teacher said.

I turned back to the teacher and raised my hand.

"Teacher, Hamamoto's not feeling well. Can I take her to the nurse's office?"



We talked quietly so the school nurse couldn't hear us.

"We've got to get out of this school."

"And do what?"

"We need the lady's power to resolve this situation. I don't know if we can save your father or not. But there's no other way to do that."

The door to the nurse's office opened. We heard a student talking to the nurse. Hamamoto and I perked up our ears, listening to the voices on the other side of the curtain. After a while, Uchida poked his face through the curtain. "If you're going somewhere, I'm coming, too," he said.

We slipped out of the office while the nurse was in the bathroom.

We ran down the empty hall and soon reached the shoeboxes. We put our shoes on and hid behind the shoeboxes, watching the front gate.

We could see teachers patrolling through the glass. And we could see evacuated townspeople coming in. They were all headed toward the gym. Everyone looked scared. My mother might be among them. We'd planned to slip out the gates when the teachers weren't looking, but with this many people, there was no way we'd ever get a chance.

Then Suzuki, Kobayashi, and Nagasaki came running up.

"What are you up to?" Suzuki said.

"None of your business," Hamamoto said. "How'd you get away?"

"If you're leaving school, we'll help," Suzuki said. I looked at him, surprised. "This accident has something to do with that thing in the woods, right?" he said.

"I had no idea you were capable of deductions, Suzuki."

"I'm not stupid."

"But there's a lot of people out front. We can't leave."

"Go around by the rabbit cages and climb over the wall. Will you forgive me now?"

"I don't know yet," Hamamoto said.

Suzuki led us through the courtyard. I guess the principal was really flustered, because the chime signaling an announcement went off twice but was followed by silence.

According to Suzuki, they'd used the wall behind the rabbit cage

to get off school grounds any number of times. There was a mound of earth there, and if you jumped just right, your hands would reach the top of the wall. There was no need to go over the wall when you could just leave through the front gate, but at times like this, his knowledge proved unexpectedly useful. I was impressed.

We slipped around the back of the rabbit cage.

Suzuki went up first, showing us how. He sat astride the wall and whispered, "Hurry."

Uchida took a short run and scrambled up the wall.

Hamamoto couldn't quite make it. "Kobayashi, make a step for her," Suzuki said. Kobayashi scowled but got down on his hands and knees. "Sorry," Hamamoto said, stepping up on his back. Even then, she only just got her hands on the wall but couldn't manage to pull herself up. I put my hands on her butt and pushed.

"My butt! You're touching my butt!" she yelled.

"I have no choice."

"Shhh! They'll find us!"

Suzuki was right. Just as Hamamoto finally managed to scramble up on the wall, we heard teacher's voices. Suzuki, Uchida, and Hamamoto quickly jumped down the other side of the wall. I hurriedly jumped at the wall myself. The only reason I didn't get caught was because Kobayashi and Nagasaki tackled the teachers, buying me time.

On the other side of the wall, I could hear the teachers yelling, "Come back here!"

"So what now?" Suzuki said, gasping for breath. He was rather overweight and not good at running.

"We need to see the lady from the dentist's office," I said.

"Won't she have evacuated to the gym?"

"She wouldn't do that."

If the lady had figured out her own nature, I thought she'd be sitting somewhere, perfectly calm.

Fortunately, we were able to move forward without running into any evacuees. We did see an old man walking alone, but it didn't cause a problem. I just said, "There's an evacuation warning out, so you should go to the elementary school." "I see," the old man said. "Thank you."

We followed the narrow roads cautiously and poked our heads out on the main road. There wasn't a single car driving anywhere. It was very quiet. Like the world had ended while we were at school.

There was a row of fire trucks, more than any of us had ever seen in one place, dividing our town in half. Where had all these fire trucks come from? The silent neighborhood had a bright-red line drawn across it, big trucks and smaller fire department vehicles, all spaced

out evenly like a diorama. Men in blue uniforms were gathered around the trucks, talking. There were two ambulances parked a short distance away and some cop cars, too. It was all so quiet, it was hard to believe there was anything dangerous going on. But there was a giant, glittering silver dome over the forest behind the water-tower hill, and from the depths of the forest, we could hear a strange rustling sound.

“Wow,” Suzuki said.

It was definitely an exciting spectacle.

“The town’s on lockdown,” I said. “If we don’t get through that line, we can’t reach the dentist’s office.”

“Proceed with caution.”

Everyone there was staring in the direction of the water-tower hill, so we crossed the main road like marbles rolling across a carpet. We took the alley between the stationery supply store and the dry cleaners into the residential area.

I’d hoped it would be a clean run from there to the dentist, but we were spotted by three uniformed firemen on patrol.

“What are you doing here?” one asked nicely. “There’s an evacuation warning...”

“Ready! Go!” Suzuki shouted.

At his signal, we all broke into a run. The firemen spread their arms, trying to catch us, but we scattered, and they couldn’t catch us all. I saw Uchida and Hamamoto get nabbed out of the corner of my eye, but I got past the firemen safely.

Suzuki was running ahead of me.

“They got the others!” I shouted. Suzuki looked over his shoulder, still running. Someone grabbed my shoulder from behind. “Hey!” an angry voice shouted.

Suzuki spun around, came running back, and grabbed the man who’d caught me by the side.

This allowed me to slip free of his grasp.

“Run! Run!” Suzuki yelled behind me. I ran like I’d never run before. I was so fast, I thought it was a shame no one was recording my speed.

I ran down a deserted tree-lined road.

When I passed Seaside Café, I saw the lady sitting in a seat at the window. She had her elbows on the table and was nodding off. The lights in Seaside Café were off, and there were no other customers. Yamaguchi wasn’t there, either. Everyone else had evacuated.

I went inside and sat down opposite her. Her eyes opened. She didn’t bat an eye at me being there. I was glad I’d found her.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello,” she said, yawning. “You feeling better?”

“I am. I thought you’d be at the dentist’s office.”

“There’s an evacuation warning out. The office is closed today. But I didn’t feel like evacuating. I thought you might come by, so I waited here.”

“You knew I’d come?”

“I know exactly how you think.”

The lady looked out the window. “Ah,” she said. The fireman had come chasing after me.

We hid until he passed by.

Under the table, the lady put her forehead on mine, smiling.

“So, kiddo. You’ve solved the mystery?”

I nodded.



I sat under the table, reviewing my notes, organizing my hypothesis.

“You aren’t human,” I said.

“Right, I’m not human.”

“Because you told me that, I was able to formulate the Aoyama Hypothesis. If you’re not a human, but something more like the penguins, then your No Food Experiment makes sense, and it explains why you got sick on the train like the penguin did. You survive on Penguin Energy.”

“Where does Penguin Energy come from?”

“I compared the charts of your health and The Sea’s size. Your health is linked to The Sea’s diameter. When The Sea gets bigger, you get better. And when it gets smaller, your health deteriorates. You and the penguins are both living on invisible energy radiating from The Sea. If The Sea gets bigger, it gives off more energy, so you get better. This also explains why you and the penguins got sick when you rode the train. Because the train took you too far away, and energy from The Sea could no longer reach you.”

“No, that doesn’t make sense,” the lady said. “The penguins destroy The Sea, right? Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“The penguins do break up The Sea, making the pieces of it smaller. That’s why the more penguins you make, the more The Sea gets broken, and the more it shrinks, and the less energy it gives off, and the sicker you get. But in return, the penguins have their mortal enemy, the Jabberwocks. The Jabberwocks eat the penguins, there are less penguins, and The Sea starts waxing again. And you feel better.”

“Like the food chain.”

“I’ve named this the Penguin System. The penguins and the Jabberwocks are opposites, and The Sea’s balance is maintained by the two of them. So what exactly is The Sea? I’ve been thinking about

that for a while. We've discovered a number of strange aspects to it. It bends certain kinds of light, causes people to travel through time, and can change the shapes of clouds in the sky. For Project Amazon, we followed the stream that runs through that clearing but discovered that it flows forever in an infinite loop. That's physically impossible, but The Sea makes it possible."

"If it's physically impossible, then it's still impossible."

"It's impossible in our world. That's why I've spent all this time thinking The Sea was something unbelievably strange. But then I started to think that The Sea was actually something that shouldn't exist in our world. All along, I thought of The Sea as a physical object. But what if it was a hole? What if it's a tear in our world, a mistake God made, and The Sea is just how we perceive the resulting hole?"

"You're losing me."

"We said the penguins destroy The Sea. But that isn't accurate. The Sea is already broken. The penguins are repairing it. We only thought their actions were a contradiction because we didn't know that the entire reason they exist was to repair the broken spot we called The Sea."

The lady raised a hand, thinking about this.

"Then by making penguins, I'm helping to seal the hole in the world?" she said.

"I think so."

"But I haven't made any lately."

"At night, you make Jabberwocks. There were lots of Jabberwocks in the forest. The thing Suzuki caught that caused such a commotion was a Jabberwock. I gave you some advice, saying that you'd feel better if you made things other than penguins. But if you make things other than penguins, they become Jabberwocks and eat the penguins. The Sea gets bigger, and you feel better, too. You kept making Jabberwocks so you could avoid feeling awful. But as a result, the tear in our world grew larger and larger. Which brings us to right now."

We looked out the window.

We could see the clouds above the Jabberwock Woods being twisted into funnels. We could see the top of The Sea rising above the forest. The Sea was swallowing the woods.

"Wow. You really thought this through," the lady said.

She put her hands on her hips, staring out the window. Her face had a healthy glow. According to my hypothesis, she wasn't human... but I found that hard to believe. Forming a hypothesis and believing that hypothesis were two different things.

Eyes on the window, she said, "Let's go, kiddo."

The lady and I left Seaside Café and walked through the deserted neighborhood. We were spotted by a patrol car once and yelled at through a megaphone, but we were able to hide successfully the rest of the time. From the park where the summer festival was held, we looked toward the woods and saw the massive dome of The Sea peeping over the top, rippling and reflecting light like the real sea.

"It's almost swallowed the entire forest," the lady said.

"The investigation team is inside The Sea."

"What happens if you go in?"

"I don't know. The probe we sent in never came out."

"I hope the penguins can help."

On our way through the neighborhood, the lady made penguin after penguin. The bulbs in the streetlights turned into penguins, falling down and swelling up like mochi cooking on the pavement. Penguins poured out of the vending machines. Everything turned into penguins, even empty cans and abandoned motorcycles in the vacant lots. The lady whistled, raising her hand, and the newborn penguins straightened up like British gentlemen and followed after her, shoving against one another.

By the time we reached the parking lot at the athletic field, we were leading an army of penguins. The lady stopped at the lot entrance, and they stopped, too, all bumping into one another.

She peered into the lot.

"No one here."

"I think they all ran away."

There was a horrible sound coming from the forest. A sound like tree trunks splitting and leaves thrashing.

The Sea was rising up beyond the trees at the back of the athletic field. The sound from the forest was the noise of The Sea shaking the trees as it passed. I narrowed my eyes, trying to observe it, but I couldn't make out what was going on inside The Sea. All I could see was a bright sea-colored gleam in the depths of the forest.

The investigation team's base was already deserted. They'd left the tents and their equipment standing there. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened to the team, but something bad had happened to Professor Hamamoto and the others, and the rest of them had beat a hasty retreat.

The lady, the penguins, and I went into the parking lot.

The equipment in the lot started swelling up, all of it turning into penguins, which waddled off in every direction. This phenomenon carried on the entire time the lady was walking across the parking lot, and the new penguins joined forces with the ones from the residential area until the lot was buried in penguins, like the shores of Antarctica in winter. The lady whistled, and the penguins started moving toward

the forest.

"It's like you're the ringmaster of the Penguin Circus," I said.

"That's lovely. I should have done just that."

Beyond the base, we found a tall fence between the forest and the lot. It seemed like the investigators had gone in and out of a locked gate near the edge of the fence, but we didn't need to.

The wave of penguins hit the fence, shoving against it.

The lady climbed over the fence, so I followed suit. The lady straddled the fence, looking back at the lot.

"Whoa," she yelled. "The penguins are breaking through!"

As we stepped into the trees beyond the fence, we heard it come crashing down. A wave of squeaking penguins came rushing over it. The wave caught us and swept us both deeper into the forest.

"Uh-oh, kiddo!" the lady yelled. "The Sea is right there!"

The Sea was coming up fast. The border between it and the forest was like a wall of water, glittering with a blue-green light. There was a faint light on the other side that made the forest glow. A dodgeball-size ball of water popped out of the wall, rolling through the trees, and the penguins surrounded it, breaking it to pieces.

I saw a number of Jabberwocks coming through the trees. There was no expression on their blue whale-like faces; the sheer quantity of penguins didn't seem to surprise them at all. They opened their mouths wide and swallowed up some penguins, but there were just so many penguins that they hardly made a dent. In moments, the Jabberwocks were caught by the black tsunami of penguins and swept away.

The penguins in the lead leaped into the wall of water one after another. Inside the wall, they spun once, tracing spirals in the glowing water, then took off like rockets toward the sky. Moving out of sight.

Stuck between The Sea and the penguins, the lady and I had nowhere to run.

The lady grabbed me and pulled me to her. A moment later, the penguin wave crested, shoving us into The Sea.

There was a strange, soft light filling the space inside The Sea. I thought the shores of the Cambrian-period sea must be just like this. The lady had her face pressed against mine, her eyes screwed tightly shut. It felt both cold and warm. A few dozen penguins that had come in with us took off like space rockets, leaving trails of white bubbles in their wakes, darting in and out of one another's paths as they headed up toward the sky.



The next thing I knew, the lady and I were rocking on the surface of

the water, gazing up at the blue sky above.

A single vapor trail cut across the sky.

The lady sat up. "Are we in The Sea?" she murmured. I sat up and looked around. There was a bright ocean as far as the eye could see. I looked down and saw that we were sitting on a giant black kickboard made of penguins. Every now and then, a large wave would come by, lifting the penguins and us. I decided the SS *Penguin* was a wonderful ship.

On the horizon, there were very summery cumulonimbus, but the clouds were rapidly changing shape, like time-lapse photography. Like somebody was playing with cotton candy, changing its shape. But then I looked in the other direction, and that horizon was dark as night, with purple lightning flashing.

"Well, seems like we're still alive."

"I wonder where the investigation team is?"

"Penguins," the lady said. "Bring us to them."

We moved slowly through the ocean.

There were all kinds of islands scattered across this strange ocean. It was like the entire earth had been covered in water, and only a little land remained.

The first thing we noticed was a large shopping mall. It was half underwater. It was a ruin, overgrown with ferns, but it was definitely the shopping mall from our town. There was nobody there. It was like an abandoned shipwreck. There was a mass of large birds on the roof, watching us as we floated by.

"Seems like the ends of the earth," the lady said.

"I may be the first person to ever set foot on the ends of the earth. That means I'm humankind's representative."

"One small representative."

"One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

There was nowhere to land at the mall, so we sailed on.

We passed a row of high-tension towers rising out of the water's surface and a savannah-like grassy island with zebras running across. Far in the distance, on the horizon, I saw a single line rising to the heavens. I thought that must be the space elevator.

"Look there," the lady said, standing up and pointing.

The island had houses on it. Cute little houses, like the ones in our neighborhood. The island was divided into a grid with concrete, but only two houses were built on it. The lady and I landed and walked across the island for a while. Most of it was grassy lots. There was a single vending machine sitting all alone. As we walked, I remembered what our town had been like when my family first moved here. It was like our town back then, in miniature.

"This is a strange island," I said.

The lady leaned against the vending machine, looking up at the sky. "It's a mystery," she said.

Not far from this island was an even bigger one. A continent. Long before we landed there, we saw a huge crowd of penguins on the beach. Some were standing in the surf, doing nothing. Others were waddling along the beach.

The lady and I stepped onto the shore, and the line of penguins stretched along the beach, far into the distance. At the end of this penguin highway, the beach suddenly gave way to a town. A town built on the slope of a hill.

"There's a town on the coast," the lady said. "See?"

We began walking along the beach, following the penguin highway. Listening to the sound of the waves.

As we walked, the lady pointed out across the ocean. "Look there," she said.

A strange phenomenon was happening across the water.

One section of the ocean was churning violently. Round, balloon-like things were rising to the surface, splitting apart and fusing together again. From the beach where we stood, the bubbles looked to be the size of balloons, but they were likely much larger than the lady. At last, we saw a blue whale's head emerge from between the bubbles. It hadn't surfaced from deeper in the ocean. A blue whale was being created on the surface of the water. Its body was made of seawater, so it appeared transparent against the blue sky. The giant see-through whale twisted its body, leaping into the air. Then it dived back into the water. It did this over and over. The whale's body slowly disintegrated, its head growing narrower and narrower. I thought it looked like a long-necked dragon, and as I watched, it sprouted wings, the head and neck melting away, growing smaller. Or it grew horns, like a unicorn's, all over its body. Or we caught glimpses of a long elephantine nose through the waves.

This stunning phenomenon went on and on.

Over and over, one thing after another was created, like something searching for a form it liked. When it didn't like the results, it destroyed its creations. It was as if a giant child our eyes could not perceive was playing with LEGOs. I could have watched it change form forever.

"God's doing experiments," the lady said.

At last, we reached the end of the beach and the start of the coastal town. On the slope leading from the water up the hill were rows of foreign-styled houses, a maze of streets running between them. No sign of anyone living in them. Just penguins lined up in neat rows on the narrow paths. We walked through tunnels made of buildings and alleys with benches next to trees. At the top of the hill

was a house with white walls and open windows, curtains fluttering in the breeze. It seemed like at any second someone would lean out the window, reaching both arms out toward the ocean.

"If I'm not human, why do I have memories of a coastal town?" the lady said as we walked through one alley. "I remember my father and mother and have memories of a life leading up to this point. Are those all fake?"

"I couldn't say."

"But hey, at least we made it to a coastal town."

We took our time climbing up the hill. I glanced back and saw the alley full of penguins diligently chasing after us.

"Are the penguins waiting before they destroy The Sea?"

"If The Sea we're in is destroyed and the world is permanently repaired, what happens to me?"

"I don't know."

"...You do, don't you?"

"If my hypothesis is correct, the penguins will vanish."

"And me?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Is that your answer, kiddo?" the lady said gently.

"This is merely a hypothesis."

"So there's a chance you're wrong."

"A significant one."

We saw black smoke rising from the peak we were heading toward.

On the slope ahead of us, we saw a man sitting on the stairs. He looked like a college student. The man who'd brought Uchida a handkerchief after the investigation team had scolded us and made Uchida cry. He saw the lady and me coming up the hill and was so surprised, it took him a while before he could say anything. Then he turned around and yelled, "Professor! Professor!"

There was a small stone-paved square in front of the church, and all the investigation team members The Sea had swallowed were gathered there. They didn't know how to get home, so they'd lit a fire there, like Robinson Crusoe when he reached that deserted island. Professor Hamamoto came running over to us and stared at us in silence for a long time. He seemed entirely at a loss, like a kid my age had grown a massive beard.

"Aoyama," Professor Hamamoto said. "What are you doing here?"

I bowed. "We've come to rescue you all," I said.

The penguins were piling up behind us, crowding together until they filled every inch of the narrow slope. When they found a spot to stand, they stood at attention, staring up at the sky.

"Is it about time to go?" the lady said, looking up at the sky, just

like the penguins.

“Can you leave just a little bit of The Sea?”

“Why?”

“If you leave a little bit, some Penguin Energy will remain, and you can stay healthy.”

“I dunno if it’ll be that easy.”

The lady hopped up on the wall by the alley at the top of the hill and looked down at the sea. The town was completely covered in penguins. All the penguins seemed to be holding their breaths, waiting for her signal.

“Then let’s all go home,” she said. She raised her hand toward the sky, blue like the Cambrian period.

A stir ran through the assembled penguins, like ripples running across them. Staring up at the sky, one after another, they took off, flying straight up. So many of them that it grew dark around us. The penguins flew in all directions, and everywhere they flew, they left trails behind, like the ones planes leave in their wake. It looked like these trails were dividing the blue sky into pieces.

And The Sea crumbled.



The cracks in the sky joined together, forming one big tear, which came down on us like a giant whip cracking... And then suddenly, we were standing in the parking lot near the athletic field. The Sea behind us was collapsing, and Seas of various sizes were rolling away into the neighborhood.

We all fled to the stands on the side of the field to avoid contact with those remnants. The investigation team still seemed unclear as to just what it was they were seeing.

We watched as The Sea crumbled, flowing out of the forest and sweeping through the neighborhood like a tsunami. It made no sound at all. We could see penguins swimming across The Sea’s waves. Countless small rainbows appeared and vanished on the surface of the flow. The waves broke apart, Sea spheres rolled across the field, and the penguins swarmed around, breaking those apart.

“What are the penguins doing?” Professor Hamamoto asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said.

“What is this water-like substance? Aoyama, do you know what’s going on here?”

“Maybe I do. But this is my research project. I can’t tell the secrets of my research to anyone.”

Professor Hamamoto scowled at me. I met his gaze.

He didn’t say anything else.

I looked over at the forest and saw a group of Jabberwocks clustering on top of the water tower. When they got to the top, they stopped moving altogether; one after another, they burst like water balloons, vanishing entirely.

Eventually, The Sea's collapse ended, and the force of the tsunami running through town subsided.

"Let's get going," the lady said, holding out her hand to me. I took it, and we clambered down off the stands. The investigation team stayed frozen on top, watching us go. Professor Hamamoto took a step forward.

"Wait!" he said. "It's dangerous! Stay here with us!"

"Professor, have a nice day. Good-bye!" the lady said.

"I said it's dangerous!"

"But, Professor, we have urgent business."

Hopping off the stands, the lady and I waved at the team and left the athletic field behind.

There were still shattered fragments of The Sea rolling through town, but the penguins following us took care of them one at a time.

There was no one in town. The sad squeaks of the penguins echoed through it, a lonely sort of sound. We'd returned from one end of the earth, but it was like we'd found ourselves in a different one. I glanced back as we walked, but The Sea's dome could no longer be seen over the Jabberwock Woods.

Instead, the remains of The Sea were racing freely through town. By the time we reached Seaside Café, it had reached the vacant lot by the dentist's office. The lady stood by the surf, kicked The Sea, and it shattered into marble-size balls that danced through the air. They soon faded to nothing.

We stepped into the deserted Seaside Café.

The lady went behind the counter and made some coffee. "You drink this, right?" she asked. "Sure," I said. We sat at our usual seat by the window. She brought two cups over, steam rising off them. I was all wet and starting to feel a little cold, so the warm coffee was very welcome.

"Want some sugar?"

"No, thanks."

"Don't force yourself."

I drank the coffee, staring out the window.

Outside, The Sea's level was subsiding. The rainbows it had kicked up here and there were fading out.

Penguins were gathering in the lot by the dentist.

At first, it was just a few here and there around the empty lot, but soon they started flowing in endlessly. I couldn't begin to count them. It was like every penguin in Antarctica had decided to move here.

Penguin after penguin came diligently waddling in, joining the flock that already had the entire lot buried. Then they stopped, looking relieved.

All the penguins looked up at the sky like they were waiting for something.

The lady and I put the chessboard on the table.

But we didn't play chess.

"Kiddo, The Sea seems to have been entirely destroyed."

"There were a *lot* of penguins."

The lady appeared to be at peace. She was watching the penguins through the window.

There were so many penguins now, they were spilling over the edges of the vacant lot. Staring up at the sky, they slowly started disappearing. Several small tornados sprang up, shaking the windowpanes. The penguins didn't panic, just waited for their turn to disappear.

The lady put her chin on her hand and looked at me.

"So my memories and I were all created."

"Does that feel right to you?"

"It doesn't."

"It doesn't seem right to me, either."

"Aoyama, why do you think I was born?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know why you were born?"

"Uchida and I have talked about that before. But it's a difficult topic for us. Uchida said thinking about it makes his head spin."

"Hmm. I don't blame him."

"But maybe someday I'll know why I was born."

"If you do, will you tell me?"

"I will."

The lady stood up and sat down next to me. She put both her arms around me and hugged me tight. I'd thought her breasts were like hills, but they were extremely soft and warm. Her breath on my ear was warm and moist, like a sea breeze. It tickled. How could anything so warm and moist come out of someone who wasn't a creature of this world? It didn't make sense.

"So I'm not human."

"I can't believe it."

"And you're humankind's representative."

"Yes. Someday I will become humankind's representative and go to outer space."

"If you become that important, I bet you'll be able to solve the mysteries around me. You'll be able to find me and come see me again."

“I’ll definitely come see you.”

I’d once sat staring at her face as she slept, wondering why the lady’s face had been made to look this way. In the same way, I could ask why I was here. Why was I here, why was she here, and why was she so special to me? Why could I never get tired of seeing her face, of seeing how she put her chin in her hand, of the light in her hair, of the sound of her sigh? I knew that life was born in the primordial sea and, after a dizzying length of time, evolved into humankind, and eventually, I was born. I knew that I was a boy and the genes in my cells made me predisposed to like the lady. But I didn’t want a hypothesis or a logical explanation. That wasn’t what I wanted to know. The one thing I did know for sure was that those things weren’t the answers I sought.

“Well, I’d better be going,” she said. She let go of me and started walking away.

I tried to stand up, but she turned away at the entrance to Seaside Café. “You stay here,” she said. “It might be dangerous.”

She saw me sit back down and grinned.

“Don’t cry, kiddo.”

“I won’t cry.”

And she left Seaside Café.

The sky was bright and clear, and the wind had kicked up. The wind caught the lady’s hair, and it gleamed in the light. She walked slowly down the road and into the lot by the dentist’s office. The same lots where the penguins had first appeared and where they’d disappeared. It was really quiet in Seaside Café. I could imagine the sound of her footsteps on the grass and the feel of her hair in the wind.

She was growing unsteady on her feet.

She stopped in the middle of the lot, turned toward me, and waved. A moment later, a huge gust of wind blew by, and all the glass in the café windows rattled. I’m sure that wind swept all the way through town, making the trees on the breast-shaped hills sway with a noise like a waterfall.

When the wind died down, the lady was gone.

I sat there alone for a while.

I made a record in my notebook of how it felt sitting alone at that window, but reading it over now, I don’t feel like it captured those feelings at all. I wasn’t able to reproduce it accurately. I’ve only ever felt like that once in my entire life. I have learned it is extremely difficult to write a proper account of once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

After a while, I left Seaside Café.

I walked through the deserted neighborhood, soaking in the warm sunlight.

I listened closely to the sounds of the town, but nothing seemed out of place. Just a brisk breeze blowing and the grass rustling in the vacant lots. The water tower on the hill and the vending machines by the side of the road and the empty asphalt pavement and the high-tension towers behind the forest were all just as they'd always been.

I walked past the zelkovas and saw the red row of fire trucks up ahead and a large crowd gathered around them. The ambulance lights were flashing. The investigation team was sitting with blankets around them, surrounded by firemen. Professor Hamamoto was hunched over like a bear, his arms around something. It was much smaller than the professor, so at first, I thought he was just crouching down alone.

The firemen noticed me coming toward them.

There was a commotion and a lot of yelling. They started running to save me. Then Hamamoto came flying out of the professor's arms and ran toward me, reaching me before anyone else had a chance. When she threw her arms around me, I saw that she was crying and realized just how tiny and frail she was.

We stood perfectly still for a while.

Then Hamamoto spoke, her voice almost a gasp. "Is she...?"

"The lady left."

Hamamoto's big eyes stared into mine.

"Aoyama, are you crying?"

"I've decided not to cry."

I told the lady I wouldn't cry.



When my father got back from France, he saw the coverage of our town in the papers and on TV and was very surprised.

The phenomena in our town were far too strange, and important people all across Japan attempted to offer explanations, arms folded. One insisted it was an earthquake; another, a tornado. Someone else combined the two, attaching them to something about viscous clouds. Then, someone else showed up, claiming it must have been a mass hallucination. As one person after another proposed different hypotheses, it all got too hard to follow and everyone forgot about it. Naturally, no one was arguing for the Aoyama Hypothesis.

At last, the helicopters circling the sky and the news vans went away, and the town was quiet again.

I went to school every day, just as I always had. I remained busy, with a number of different research projects on my plate.

Professor Hamamoto made no official statement about what had transpired inside The Sea, and he didn't tell Hamamoto anything, either.

Less and less people talked about it. The creature Suzuki caught had vanished, and all signs that The Sea had flooded town were gone without a trace. It felt like a dream to most people, and that made them not want to seriously talk about it. I avoided talking about The Sea or the lady or the penguins myself.

One day, Uchida and I were researching magnets at the library when we realized Hamamoto was sitting on the couch next to us. We talked about magnets for a while.

Eventually, Hamamoto said, "Aoyama, what do you think The Sea was?" It felt like it took her a lot of courage to ask. Uchida gave me a long, searching look.

"I'm still thinking about it."

"You have a hypothesis?"

"I'm not sure. I don't like the hypothesis I came up with."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"This research is going to take a very long time. I have a long road ahead of me."

"Fair. I understand." Hamamoto nodded.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," Uchida said. "I know you will."

On weekdays, I went to school, played chess with Hamamoto, and played with Uchida. I was glad that Suzuki had stopped being mean to us. Sometimes we even played games with Suzuki. On weekends, I went to the library or explored the town with Uchida and Hamamoto. We discussed the theory of relativity and the origin of life. I went to the dentist, too, and to Seaside Café.

It was mostly the same, but there were a few differences.

No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't find our way to the clearing in the Jabberwock Woods. That clearing had never existed, and with The Sea gone, it had vanished from our world. Part of the stream we had followed for Project Amazon was gone, too, and part of it had dried up and was no longer a stream at all.

And I could no longer see the lady. When I went to the dentist or Seaside Café, she was never there.



Late in fall, I went out for a drive with my father.

We went extremely far. The car traveled beneath wispy clouds, like stretched-out cotton balls. We crossed a number of rolling hills and arrived at a town far from home. There was a café in a small station even my father had never heard of. We drank coffee there.

Ever since he got back from France, my father and I had never once talked about the lady. Until now.

"You miss her?" he asked.

"I do."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"We said good-bye."

"I see. It was awfully sudden."

For a while, we drank coffee in silence.

"You once said there were problems in the world that shouldn't be solved. That if the problem I was working on was one of those, I'd end up getting hurt."

"I did say that."

"I think I know what you meant now. But I had to solve the problem."

"What I meant was cases where not solving it is best for the people involved. But sometimes that isn't true for everyone else. That's what you mean, right?"

"Why did the lady have to leave?"

"You think it isn't fair?"

"I do."

My father put his cup down on the table, looked out the window, and thought about it. Both our notebooks were lying on the table. They were new notebooks he'd brought back from France. Both covers were shining in the light.

"That's where the ends of the earth are," he said.

"Where?"

"The place you think isn't fair. You can't do anything about it, right?"

"I'm interested in the ends of the earth. But they're extremely frustrating."

"But everyone wants to see them."

"Why do they?"

"Good question."

I thought about it. My father's answer was extremely difficult. When he said mysterious things like this, it sounded like the lady.

"Seeing the ends of the earth can be sad."

"Of course. That's why people cry."

"I haven't cried since I started elementary school."

"Do what feels right to you."

"I always do."

I drank my coffee. I didn't put any sugar in it, so it was extremely bitter. I didn't really think it tasted good, but it did warm me up. Every time I felt coffee sink into my belly, I found myself feeling better but also a little sadder.

"Dad, I was extremely fond of the lady," I said.

"I know," my father said.

I live in a suburban town. There are lots of rolling hills and little houses. The farther you get from the station, the newer everything is, and you get more cute little bright-colored houses that look like they're made of LEGOs. On sunny days, the entire town sparkles like it's stuffed full of sweet treats. There's a shopping mall, some high-tension towers, a dentist, Seaside Café, a hill with a water tower that looks like a spaceship, a vacant lot that looks like a savannah, the elementary school I go to, and the house I live in.

I wake up extremely early and go explore the town at dawn alone. At that time of day, there's no one else around, and I feel like I've reached the ends of the earth.

I run extremely fast toward the ends of the earth. I run so fast, everyone would be surprised, and no one could catch up with me. The road that leads to the ends of the earth is called the Penguin Highway. I believe that if I follow that road, I can see the lady again. This isn't a hypothesis. It's a personal belief.

I did the math today, and there are 3,748 days until I'm a grown-up. Every day I learn more things about the world, becoming better than I was the day before. I can't imagine how great I will become. I'm sure that I'll become a great grown-up who doesn't need to sleep and who has shiny white permanent teeth. I'll grow much taller and have plenty of muscles. Perhaps lots of girls will ask me to marry them. But I already know who I'm going to marry, so I'll have to turn them all down.

I'll be able to stay up all night with the lady and carry her when she falls asleep. If I become important, I'll be able to do lots of things that impress her. Maybe she'll say "Wow." But even if she just says "Hmm," I won't mind.

I think I'd like to hear her say "Hmm" again.

This time, we'll finally take that train and visit the ocean.

I plan to tell her about a lot of things while I'm on the train. I'll tell her how I ran down the Penguin Highway. About all the places I'm going to have adventures, the people I'm going to meet, the things I'm going to say, and the things I'm going to think about. I'll tell her how much I'll grow up before I see her again.

And then I'll tell her just how much I love her.

How much I want to see her again.

Moto Hagio

*This commentary references key points in the story, so if you haven't read it yet, exercise caution.

How well do we remember being in fourth grade? Half our days spent at school, in classes, in the schoolyard after school, classmates, teachers, school lunches, bells. The sky, rain, and wind. Each day seemed so long that when we were told something would happen a week from now, it felt like an eternity. Every day so dramatic, yet nothing in particular ever happened.

This is a story about a fourth grader named Aoyama and a mysterious older lady.

The town where he lives, the hill nearby, his school and friends, his family and the people around them. He makes a conscious effort to work hard and study on a daily basis, and each day is filled with discoveries and mysteries. He fills notebooks with research goals, explores, and lets his curiosity and enthusiasm broaden his horizons. Thus far, he might sound like any other boy, but this next part is key. This boy is thinking about his future self. He aims to be greater than he was the day before. To not lose to his previous self, to avoid embarrassing himself. There is so much time remaining before he is a grown-up.

Someday, he will represent the human race.

And he already knows who he's going to marry.

Aoyama is a somewhat unusual child. He's clever. Too clever.

He decided not to get angry when he was five years old. Really? Can he? He can. When he feels himself getting annoyed, he just thinks about breasts. Effective!

And these are the lady's breasts. These are a mystery to him, and as the oddly mature boy stares at the lady's sleeping face, he discovers her beauty and considers where genetics and evolution converge.

Is this what boys are like? Are they all this analytical? I thought boys were more childish, prattling on, simplistic, and direct. Yes, like the bully, Suzuki. Like his target, Uchida. Archetypal boys like Suzuki

can be found all over Japanese literature.

But this is the first time I've encountered a boy like Aoyama. And yet, I feel like I know him. Imagine Newton as a child. Imagine Galileo as a boy. I bet they had a lot in common. Aoyama is a sci-fi child. A philosopher and a researcher. Aiming to become a strong, silent type, he regrets always talking too much.

Aoyama talks to the lady a lot. Seeing this child philosopher and explorer interact with this unflappable, indifferent lady is a newfound pleasure. Penguins might appear, and bats might start flying around, yet their conversations are restrained and rhythmical. "Hmm." This rhythm is as cheery as a boy's footsteps. "Good night." This oddly mature boy loves the lady while pondering genetics and evolution.

The Coke can morphing into a penguin is like an impossible evolution of species played in fast-forward. When Aoyama describes it as looking like slow motion, I found myself strangely impressed with his eyesight. If you have vision like that, everything your eyes light upon must stimulate your mind. No wonder he became a philosopher in the fourth grade. And he already loved exploring.

He moved to this suburb when he was seven. A house surrounded by vacant lots, looking like a research laboratory built to observe the ends of the earth. He feels duty bound to explore until he finds the ends of the earth. He plans to go to outer space someday. Because he was built this way, he can pursue his research on the lady and the penguins.

Aoyama encounters The Sea in the middle of a clearing. Solving the mystery of this phenomenon will benefit the lady, himself, and the people in town. But The Sea begins to overflow the clearing. Swallowing up the town and the people in it.

The Sea is made of space and time, the product of something broken somewhere. The lady makes penguins to eliminate The Sea. At first, the lady doesn't know what she's doing. The lady believes herself to be human. She seems so humanlike. The readers assume she is, too. But this is not the case.

The lady's role is to fix what has broken. Once she understands her role, she completes her job and vanishes. They have their last conversation at Seaside Café. They talk, knowing they have little time left.

"I'm not human." She doesn't know what she really is, either. So she gives the boy a research topic.

"I bet you'll be able to solve the mysteries around me. You'll be able to find me and come see me again."

"I'll definitely come see you."

What is The Sea? Who is the lady? The boy and his father talk.

Seeing the ends of the earth can be sad.

Off he goes, running toward the ends of the earth. Following the Penguin Highway so he can find the lady again. So he can grow up and see her once more. So they can go to the coastal town together.

When will that happen? How well do the dreams and loves of humankind ferment and age until our deaths? While retaining the freshness of the moment they were born. I'm sure Aoyama will keep his promise to the lady. When I read the last page of this boy's story, I wanted to hug both Aoyama and this book.

Aoyama, you may insist that you won't cry, but I did.

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